

COMMON COUNTRY ANALYSIS



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List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AMR	Ani-Microbial Resistance
CAT	Convention Against Torture
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CCS	Climate Change Strategy CCPR
CCPR	Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CESCR	Covenant or Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CO2	Carbon Dioxide
COP	Convention of Parties
COT	Crown of Thorns
CPED	Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRMW	Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CWD	Children with Disabilities
DC	Defined Contributions
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EmOC	Emergency Obstetric Care
EPPA	Environmental Protection and Preservation Act
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FCSC	Family and Children's Service Centres
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GCM	Global Compact on Safe Orderly and Regular Migration
GDI	Gender Development Index
CH4	Methane
GHG	Green House Gas
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOI	Government of India
GOM	Government of Maldives
GST	General Sales Tax
H1	First half of fiscal year
HDI	Human Development Index
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HIES	Household Income Expenditure Survey
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HLPF	High Level Political Forum
HR	Human Right
HRCM	Human Rights Commission of the Maldives
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IFAD	International Fund for Agriculture development
IFI	International Financial Institution
IHR	International Health Regulation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IOTC	Indian Ocean Tuna Commission
JSC	Judicial Service Commission
Kg	Kilo Gram
KWp	Kilowatt peak
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
MAP	Maldives Agribusiness Programme
MCCPF	Maldives Climate Change Policy Framework
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MGFSS	Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services
MNPI	Ministry of National Planning and Infrastructure
MNU	Maldives National University
MPI	Multi-dimensional Poverty Index
MRPS	Maldives Retirement Pension Scheme
MTBF	Medium Term Budgetary Framework
MTEF	Medium Term Expenditure Framework NCD
MQA	Maldives Qualification Authority
N2O	Dinitrogen Monoxide
NALO	National Assessment of Learning Outcomes
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NDA	National Drugs Authority
NDC	Nationally Determined Conditions
NCD	Non-communicable Disease
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NER	Net Enrolment Ratio
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NMCC	National Ministerial Coordination Committee
NPI	New Policy Initiative
NPSD	National Programme for Sustainable Development
NSDF	National Strategic Development Framework
NSP	National Spatial Plan
NSPA	National Social Protection Agency
OABP	Old-Age Basic Pension

ODA	Official Development Assistance
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OOP	Out of Pocket
OP	Optional Protocol
p.a.	per annum
PFM	Public Finance Management
POE	Points of Entry
PPG	Public and Publicly Guaranteed
PSIP	Public Sector Investment Programme
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
RBB	Results Based Budgeting
RIA	Rapid Integration Assessment
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAMOA	SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action
SAP	Strategic Action Plan
SBI	State Bank of India
SCA	Senior Citizen Allowance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SEN	Special Education Needs
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SME	Small-Medium Enterprise
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SPECA	Special Programme for Economies of Central Asia
SR	Special Rapporteur
SST	Sea Surface Temperature
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
STO	State Trading Organisation
TB	Tuberculosis
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
THE	Total Health Expenditure
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDESA	United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDS	United Nations Development System
UNECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services

UNRCCA	United Nations Regional Centre for Central Asia
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
UNW	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WAMCO	Waste Management Corporation
WB	World Bank
WEF	Women Enterprise Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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Purpose and Development of the CCA

Following the repositioning of the UN Development System by UN Member States, the UN system in the Maldives' is developing a Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) as its planning and implementation instrument in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), with a commitment to leave no one behind and in line with Maldives human rights and other international obligations. It will outline the UN's collective response for 2022-2026, to national development priorities as contained in the Government's Strategic Action Plan (2019-2023), COVID-19 National Resilience and Recovery Plan 2020-2022, and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The UNSDCF will support economic and social transformation, and the development of an equal, inclusive, resilient, and peaceful society through sustainable development strategies specific to Maldives' country context and leveraging financing for achieving the SDGs. The UNSDCF will be centred around a set of priority areas where the UN will contribute to Maldives' development process over the next five years. These priority areas will be identified, in consultation with the Government and other stakeholders based upon the findings of this CCA, the UN's comparative advantages vis-à-vis the Government and other development actors.

These preparations are informed by an independent evaluation of the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2016-2020. This Common Country Analysis (CCA) is the UN system's independent, impartial, and collective assessment and analysis of the country situation, providing insights to guide the development of the new UNSDCF. The CCA follows the conceptual framework and structure set out in the UNDSG guidance. The format has been adapted slightly to reflect the organisation of nationally available information.

The CCA articulates the context, opportunities and challenges facing the Maldives, encompassing sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, peace and security, and climate and disaster resilience. The CCA has been largely informed by the situational analyses by Government and the UNCT, which provide information on past targets, achievements and challenges and take stock of remaining challenges. It uses secondary data from national, international and UN sources. Additional primary information gathering has been provided by UN agencies by leveraging UN system convening power to engage with the government and partners, including the most vulnerable and marginalized people and their organizations. Review of existing sources (assessment, publications, research findings, analytical tools, big data, national surveys) of disaggregated data (sex, income, age, and other factors) both at national and global level was also undertaken.

Pertinent information has been obtained from a range of national sources, as well as a wide range of studies and reports of UN agencies, the World Bank, IMF, IDB, bilateral organisations and others. This review has included specific studies on critical areas such as policies and programmes to mainstream SDGs and climate change issues, generating employment (especially of youth), human rights and gender equality.

Data and information have been disaggregated to the extent possible. The CCA highlights the data gaps, noting the need to strengthen capacity to collect data and continuously fill the gaps through future assessment. Targeted analysis has been undertaken by each of the UN agencies in line with their mandate. The greatest limitation to the CCA has been gaps in data to support comprehensive thematic analyses, or to map national realities against SDG targets. Secondly, there is a severe limitation in the availability of data disaggregated geographically, by gender, age, and other relevant characteristics in the Maldives.

The preliminary findings of the CCA published in March 2020 were validated by UN and national stakeholders at a workshop. Extensive comments on the draft CCA were also made by the regional Peer Support Group. This present document has been updated to reflect the known impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. UN agencies, funds and programmes based in Male and beyond contributed to this review.

The CCA will be a living document, updated regularly as required, to assure that the UNSDCF the UN's analysis of key issues remains current.

Executive Summary

Driven by international tourism and, more recently, construction, Maldives has achieved strong economic growth, which averaged 5.1% annually from 2000 to 2019. The country made tremendous progress toward reducing poverty, achieving universal primary education, reducing child mortality and diseases, narrowing the gender gap in health, education, and income, and a focus on addressing the threat of climate change. Forty years of rapid growth fuelled by high-end tourism has brought the nation from least developed to upper-middle income status. Maldives has achieved improvements in important socio-economic indicators and has almost completed its demographic transition with the bulk of the population being of working age. Infant mortality and maternal mortality rates are the lowest for the country.

As an island nation, Maldives faces huge challenges in the development arena. The nation's geography makes equitable and inclusive development difficult and expensive to ensure. The country faces challenges in building opportunities for young people, improving gender equality, improving health care, migration and urbanization issues and development of basic infrastructure, and providing equitable access to quality basic services across the islands. Being a low-lying island nation, the impact on climate change cannot be neglected.

In addition to obstacles common to other small island developing states (SIDS), Maldives' major challenges centre on the issues of inclusiveness, resilience, and sustainability. Until recently, the tourism sector generated limited local employment and economic linkages. The economy is dependent on the state and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for employment and most services. Regulatory barriers, inefficiencies, skills shortage, and competition for credit add to the disadvantages caused by a small market and dispersed population, slowing the development of a diversified private sector economy that is more resilient to external shocks. Many islands do not adequately treat waste and wastewater, affecting the quality of island life and the integrity of the marine resources on which Maldives' tourism success depends.

Despite high public revenues, the cost of providing subsidized services to a dispersed population, and heavy government borrowing and guarantees to finance large infrastructure and social housing projects undermine fiscal sustainability. Persistent budget deficits increase public debt and crowd out the private sector from financial markets. While public revenue levels (26% of GDP during 2014–2019) exceed the Asian average,¹ there are abundant subsidies to ensure affordability and widespread access. High levels of employment by the government and SOEs are an important income source for the population, but reduce efficiency and productivity, making the economy less resilient. Since 2015, ambitious investment in public infrastructure and social housing further strained the public budget. Budget deficits were financed through growing external debt, leading to a classification of *high* risk of debt distress by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).² High government debt in the domestic banks' asset portfolio crowds out lending to the private sector.³

Currently within and between waves of COVID-19 infections, the development and economic realities of the Maldives are more fragile and uneven than they have been in more than a decade, with the country under high risk of debt distress for the medium term, but also a major spike in unemployment among Maldivians and migrant workers, with women and the youth especially affected. This is coupled with increasing environmental vulnerabilities and social inequalities, with increasing gender inequality, and widening of the gap between the rich and poor, capital and the Atolls.

¹ Includes tax and nontax revenues, excluding grants. About 40% of public revenues are directly related to the tourism sector. The average revenue-to-GDP ratio in Asia was 23% in 2018 (excluding Pacific SIDS at 65%, as a result of grants, royalties, compact payments, and other non-fiscal revenue sources). ADB. 2019. *Basic Statistics*.

² Total public debt outstanding grew by 73% during 2014–2019, and is equivalent to 62% of GDP; external government debt grew by 92% over the same period to reach 25% of GDP. Maldives Monetary Authority. 2020. *April 2020 Monthly Statistics*. Malé (Tables 6.1 and 15). The IMF (IMF. 2020. *Maldives: Request for Disbursement Under the Rapid Credit Facility. IMF Country Report*. No. 20/133. Washington, DC) assesses the debt as sustainable if stated policies are implemented, even given the present COVID-19 scenario.

³ Financial corporations (pension funds, other fund accounts, finance and insurance companies) hold 41% of the domestic debt (72% of their assets), followed by commercial banks with 38% (22% of assets) and the Maldives Monetary Authority with 19% (33% of its assets).

In less than one year, COVID-19 has seen Maldives fall to among the lowest within the region's economies, as a result of its disproportionate dependency on tourism. New vulnerabilities have been exposed by small businesses and resorts having either closed down or cut back on staff, impacting over 11,000 employees, and more severely on daily wage earners. This new, extreme vulnerability has combined with increased tensions, conflictual language and hate speech across social and political landscapes. Political opposition and activists have contributed to a more critical environment on social media and on the streets. The government's longstanding commitment to health and education for all has largely vanquished communicable diseases and illiteracy, but the pandemic has enabled poverty and economic vulnerability to re-emerge. The COVID-19 pandemic and the socioeconomic crisis it has triggered could derail years of national efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Over a decade ago, Maldives began a journey of democratisation, resulting in political turbulence, with increasing populism, low tolerance of expressed differences, emerging conservatism and extremism, and declining trust in independent institutions including the judiciary. However, the relative political stability being enjoyed currently (though still volatile) creates an opportunity for democratic consolidation. Local elections (2021) and Presidential elections (2023) are opportunities for the gains of democratisation to be reinforced.

Successive governments have supported the development of government services, jobs, health centres and schools throughout the country, and the elaboration of a social safety net. However, recent governments have focused on short term goals, particularly on infrastructure, with serious issues around their quality, cost-effectiveness, ability to withstand shocks and capacity to provide minimum services during crisis and social and environmental impact. At present there is no participatory process for policy planning with those communities who are hard to reach and often left behind, no long-term vision for the nation nor a national development plan for sustainable development (beyond the five-year term of national administrations). This will continue to reduce opportunities to capture the first demographic dividend of the Maldives population structure, and face the challenges posed by rapid population ageing.

Internal migration from the atolls to the capital, Malé has continued, leading to the urbanization of the greater Malé area and rural depopulation. However, COVID-19 has also caused a temporary but significant return to the islands, with outflows of individuals and families and thousands of migrant workers due to financial challenges and the high cost of living in the capital. The serious challenges of urbanisation, exacerbated because of COVID-19, has prompted the resettlement of many migrant workers to other locations within the Greater Malé area and the return home of others. As the economy begins its gradual recovery, international migrants throughout the country continue to work in the tourism and construction industry. Continued high population density, difficulties in assuring the right to adequate housing, and a projected sizeable population growth has significant implications for policy and planning. During the COVID-19 lockdown, migrants were impacted by worsening living conditions, being further crammed into congested guesthouses, evicted by negligent employers, or housed in temporary Government shelters, which also lead to increased vulnerability in contracting the disease.

Since the early 2000s, and enshrined in the Constitution (2008), decentralization has been a Government agenda. However, a lack of consistency on policy by successive governments has resulted in a more centralized form of governance. The present administration is committed to decentralization and has amended the law to empower and give more financial autonomy to the local councils which will additionally have 33% of seats reserved for women (when formed). Comprehensive plans to support communities have been developed but the financial crisis will challenge the government's ability to roll out substantive programmes without incurring more debt. Due to COVID-19, the island council elections were postponed (until March 2021), and the roll out of the decentralisation agenda, and the yielding of its potential dividends, has been delayed.

Prospects of Maldives achieving the 2030 Agenda

Prosperity

Maldives promotes an open economy that has continued to grow. While it is rapidly diversifying its tourism base and expanding from high end to mid-range accommodation, dependence on high-end tourism remains. Both tourism and construction, the other major growth area, largely employ foreign migrant workers. Maldivian school-leavers are not prepared for existing skilled jobs and eschew manual trades: labour shortages coexist with youth unemployment and high non-participation in the labour force, driven in part by inequities and income disparities. Despite migrant workers contributing to the prosperity of Maldives in achieving the 2030 Agenda, they comprise the majority of workers in the hardest hit sector of tourism and construction and were disproportionately impacted by income reductions and job losses during COVID-19. The enormous financial challenges now facing Maldives are amplified by the negative impacts of COVID-19.

A low birth rate has created a 'youth bulge' in which people in their productive years outnumber young and old dependents combined. This creates the potential for a 'demographic dividend' of faster growth and high national savings, but it cannot be realized unless a dynamic private sector is created to provide jobs, and measures are agreed to prepare for the demographic shift and the education system prepares youth to provide the skills the market requires. Currently only 8 per cent of women obtain more than a basic 10 years of education. Effort to achieve these prerequisites are in their early stages with more women currently enrolled in higher education than men.

The elderly population is projected to increase five times its 2014 levels, from 16,607 to 89,945 in 2045.⁴ A shrinking Maldivian workforce coupled with a higher dependency ratio will put additional burden to support and provide social services including allocation of increased budget for health and social security. In addition, average life expectancy has increased from 76.5 (in 2005 - 2007) to 82.0 (2013 - 2015) years of age with a gap of almost 6 years between men (79.0 years) and women (85.7 years)⁵. However, data indicates that quality of life has decreased, especially for men, with increased morbidities. This is expected to create additional care burdens for women given their traditional caring roles within the households.

People

Poverty levels were 6.6 per cent in 2016 using the internal poverty line of \$1.25 (MVR70).⁶ Using a more nuanced approach to measuring poverty, the 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index indicates the incidence of poverty (H) in Maldives was 28%, and the average intensity (A) was 51%. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) was 0.145. In Maldives, more people were living in multidimensional poverty (28%) than monetary poverty (8% were living below the poverty line of MVR 74). 87% of people who are multidimensionally poor were living in the Atolls, and only 13% on the populous capital island of Male'⁷. At the national level, years of schooling contributed the most to overall poverty in Maldives at 19%, and access to health contributed 16%. Children bear the greatest burden of poverty and have a higher likelihood of being multidimensionally poorer than any other age group, with one third of 0–17 year olds living in MPI poor households.⁸ Due to increased government spending on health, education and social protection, the financial burden of poverty is declining, and the focus now needs to shift towards minimizing the urban-rural gap in the quality of service provision and tracking poverty⁹.

⁴ National Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA (2018). Maldives Population Projections 2014 - 2054: Assumptions and Results Analysis.

⁵ <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/yearbook/2020/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/11/3.6.pdf>

⁶ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Analytical Report IV: Poverty & Inequality

⁷ 10% of population in Male are multidimensionally poor whereas 40% of people in the Atolls are poor.

⁸ National Multidimensional Poverty in Maldives. 2020.

https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/National_MD_Poverty_in_Maldives_2020.pdf

⁹ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

Gender equality scores are low across all the targets. While modernization has opened new opportunities for women, it is important to address the root causes of discrimination and inequality to ensure women can also benefit. Very few women work in tourism, primarily due to cultural norms of a carer role assigned to women and social expectations and stereotypes. Largely self-employed, women were displaced from traditionally important economic roles by the advent of industrialized fish processing and commercial tailoring. The rate of female participation in the labour force is low, with women bearing a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work. Violence against women (VAW) has increased, with youth extremism, gang violence, gender inequality and VAW interconnecting due to inadequate housing and lack of productive engagement and social support for young people and families. Increasingly conservative religious and social views have witnessed significant shifting of views away from gender equality. Women's participation in politics is low.

Maternal, child and neonatal mortality rates decreased and plateaued while childhood nutrition indicators show double burden of malnutrition.¹⁰ Poor nutrition and diet, tobacco and drug use, and sedentary lifestyles pose major challenges towards achieving health targets²⁶¹. Despite the universal financial cover for health care cost of the Maldivians, access to health care, particularly for those with disabilities, mental health and long-term condition remain a significant challenge for those living in the Atolls, and foreign migrant workers. Almost 7¹¹ per cent of Maldivians have a disability. A government social protection programme includes the provision of a disability allowance, with only 25.5 per cent of eligible people receiving the allowance. Drug use among youth is a severe problem, and criminalized responses do not provide abusers "second chances". Gangs and extremist ideology provide dangerous outlets for marginalised individuals.

All children are guaranteed 14 years of free education from pre-primary level. However, education does not prepare young people for employment. Access to secondary education in the atolls is a major limitation, with only very limited access to lower-secondary and almost none for higher-secondary education. Many children end schooling early and can become engaged in risky behaviours or migrate to Malé.

There is an urgent need for a comprehensive review of human resources capacity development, to improve effectiveness and availability of quality public services.

Planet

As an archipelago, Maldives depends on the sea for its livelihood, from tourism and fisheries. Rapid urbanization and growth, as well as unsustainable and unchecked development practices across the islands, have led to serious overcrowding, fresh water, and waste treatment issues, as well as threatening the environment and future of the Maldives. The 2004 tsunami caused severe damage¹² and underscored the high vulnerability of the country to climatic events and climate change-driven sea and temperature rise: 70% of the country's total land area is less than one metres above sea level, and within 100 metres of the shore, aggravating issues of coastal flooding and salt water intrusion, impacting fresh water availability and quality. The ever-increasing use of imported fossil fuels is unsustainable. In December 2020, the President announced the Government's plan for achieving zero net emissions by 2030. Significant and dedicated actions, together with high levels of climate financing, will be required to make this a reality.

The Government has placed a high priority on the environment in international fora. The Government has raised concerns of unavailability of funding and of accessing to international finances. Locally, capacities and technologically sustainable solutions are issues as Maldives explores the creation of a circular economy. The balance of expanding the tourism industry with the future sustainability of the island nation is a source of national debate.

¹⁰ Ministry of Health (2017). Health SDG profile.

¹¹ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Eskey (2020). Maldives social protection and disability study 2017-2019. Preliminary results

¹² The Indian Ocean Tsunami hit the Maldives on December 26, 2004. It took the lives of more than 80 people and led to estimated damages of US\$470 million or 62 percent of 2004 GDP.

While there is progress on some SDG targets relevant to the environmental dimension of Agenda 2030, significant data gaps limit the possibility of conducting a robust assessment of the progress. Access to water and sanitation has improved, with 98 per cent of the population with access to safely managed drinking water and sanitation facilities¹³. However, waste management, energy and emission targets and optimal tourism remain problematic. Efforts are underway to promote renewable energy sources, with the target to replace up to 30 per cent of daytime peak load of electricity with these sources but so far renewables are supplementing, not replacing fossil fuels.

Peace

Progress related to promoting a peaceful and just society is mixed, due to the country's recent political instability, and increasing religious conservatism. There has been a strong, renewed commitment to the rule of law, accountability, and human rights. Decentralization promises to bring decision-making closer to the people and to ensure a more transparent engagement on key issues. While the Government express its commitment to build a culture of tolerance the Maldives' social media space shows a growing prevalence of hate speech exacerbated by COVID-19 and associated shocks.

Although gender inequalities have grown, some progress has been made with enactment of appropriate laws. However, as in other target areas of economic and social rights, implementation of policies is limited, genuine public debate and discourse is scarce and conservative social attitudes are prevalent.

Inadequate implementation of policies and standards is also seen in prison conditions, juvenile detention standards, drug rehabilitation options, and availability of mental health services and protective services for victims and survivors. The chief constraint is adequate budgeting and investment in skills and mindsets, and making available the human resources to implement new laws and policies.

The key challenge in achieving sustained progress in peace and justice results from a decade of polarized politics which has reduced already limited trust and created a high turnover of staff in institutions and in the civil service. The loss of experienced senior staff is especially devastating in a small island nation.

Partnerships

Progress is slow, without a national vision and plan that aligns with the SDGs through 2030. Sectors work in silos and partners are not coordinated. Medium term plans have been developed across many sectors, while no long-term national development plan exists to anchor sectoral planning towards a common vision for Maldives' future. A 'whole-of-government' approach is needed to build capacity within sectors on planning and strategizing, budgeting, data management and statistical capacity^{278,279}. A common vision for the future Maldives is absent from the political and social realms.

Localization of the SDGs has not progressed, and data gaps exist, especially in social and environmentally related SDGs. While several SDG indicators call for data that distinguish disability, among others, unavailability of disability-disaggregated data makes it difficult to track those who might be left behind. Utility of the existing data systems and data management capacities needs to be prioritised.

The Government is committed to achieving the SDGs, but progress is slow. The implementation of Agenda 2030 requires policy analysis using disaggregated data, supporting adequately resourced programmes designed to reach vulnerable communities in ways that address the causes of disparity and exclusion. This will require increased political commitment and broad-based participation to drive the national sustainable development agenda forward, with the development of a long-term national development plan at its core.

¹³ Ministry of Health & ICF (2019) Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017

Development Planning

The national planning system was abolished by the previous government. The UN is supporting the development of legislation for a National Planning Act (January 2021). The absence of a longer-term development plan is a barrier to making tangible progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030.

The Strategic Action Plan (SAP) (2019-2023) outlines a medium-term plan based on the manifesto of the governing coalition. Key national priorities and main goals are set out in the SAP, a number of sectoral plans, and in light of COVID-19, and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) (through to the end of 2023). The SAP is articulated around five themes with 33 subsector policies and related actions. The five themes are Blue Economy, Caring State, Dignified Families, *Jazeera Dhiriulhun* (Island Life) and Good Governance.

The Blue economy outlines economic priorities and how they will be delivered in a sustainable manner. It includes the productive sectors, labour, and employment. The Caring State outlines priorities relevant to social progress in the subsectors of health, education and higher education, social protection, and prevention of narcotic abuse and drug rehabilitation. Dignified Families outlines priorities for social progress, focussing on family, housing, youth, community empowerment, sports, and Islamic faith.

Jazeera Dhiriulhun outlines priorities for community infrastructure and services, including clean energy, waste as a resource, environmental protection and preservation, resilient communities, information communication, and technology, water and sanitation, transport network, arts, culture, heritage and decentralization.

Good governance outlines key governance reforms for national security and public safety, an accountable state, independent institutions and public service reform, rule of law and justice, gender equality, foreign affairs and eliminating corruption. Decentralisation of decision making is a core policy tenet of the SAP.

Leaving No One Behind

The Government is committed to the realisation of human rights but lacks capacities to fully meet its obligations as a duty-bearer. Social norms, increasing conservatism, especially gender equality and women rights, also act as barriers. Specific groups are not benefitting equally from current patterns of development, and experience inequality, discrimination, and inequity and limited participation. Women, children, youth, and migrants are the most impacted. Their vulnerabilities are further increased by reduced access to educational or training opportunities, limited access to income generating opportunities and/or productive assets, having a disability, being poor, living in the atolls, coming from a broken home, or having a different gender identity or sexual orientation, or religious identity or minority. As most migrant workers are lower-skilled, they are vulnerable to unethical recruitment and labour practices. This is especially the case in the Maldives which has witnessed human trafficking for labour, particularly in the construction and services sectors. Migrant workers are vulnerable to fraudulent recruitment practices, document retention, debt bondage, and wage confiscation. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed migrant workers to labour exploitation. Challenges faced by women are further compounded by traditional notions of the roles and responsibilities of women. Being young, unmarried and having a child out of wedlock increases exclusion. Women bear the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work including caring for the young, sick, and elderly.

Persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than those without. Already vulnerable, elderly people were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The right to a dignified life, non-discrimination and inclusion for both groups are severely affected by the lack of services and enabling social and physical environment, and concomitant state services and support.

All people at risk are negatively affected by the unravelling of traditional extended family support systems. Limited to cash grants, modern social protection measures have assisted some, but far from all. These systems have been proven in recent impact evaluations to not effectively reduce poverty among the target groups.

A unified, single national social protection system of services and support needs to be built for all vulnerable groups, including informal sector workers and a universal child benefit should be prioritized to more effectively reduce inequalities and ease the barrier of having to apply for the most vulnerable families and migrants.

LGBTQI people face a particularly difficult position, as Maldives criminalizes same sex relationships, and proponents of equality are harassed by cultural conservatives. Building acceptance, inclusion, and a consensus in favour of legal reform will require advocacy, support, dialogue, and public sensitization to human rights.

New strategies to address discrimination and exclusion, as well as the roots of extremism, are needed. Conservative narratives are used successfully to influence policy making and to discourage the efforts to address root causes of vulnerability, such as productive engagement of youth and women's empowerment. Opportunities must be sought through international partnerships, empowerment of community groups and professionals to shift the current narrative.

Regional, sub regional and cross-boundary issues

Cross-boundary and regional issues are becoming increasingly important for the Maldives politically, and in terms of attaining SDG targets as they have implications for the country's economic growth, diversification, trade, and regional cooperation. A traditionally neutral country, Maldives received strong support from India and western partners during its earlier development. The previous administration adopted a pro-China policy and borrowed heavily for infrastructure. The current government has renewed close ties with India, which has committed to finance US \$1.4 billion over a period of four years. It also maintains positive ties with China and can be expected to promote balanced relations with the large regional powers.

A Small Island Developing State (SIDS), the Maldives is a member of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), and currently chairs its Bureau. It supports the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action or SAMOA Pathway and a SIDS Partnership Framework. Maldives is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. The Maldives is a founder member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the nation plays a very active role in the association.¹⁴ Maldives rejoined the Commonwealth in February 2020, reaffirming its commitment to work with like-minded nations to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Maldives is also the member of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), an international partnership of 48 developing countries highly vulnerable to climate change. CVF serves as a South-South cooperation platform for participating governments to act together on global climate change.

Saudi Arabia plays an important role economically, culturally, and through education, in influencing the Maldives through their investments. These have included the promotion of religious conservatism. Maldives is actively engaged with partners in countering extremist narratives.

Financing landscape and opportunities

As an upper-middle income country, the Maldives is no longer a recipient of significant levels of overseas development aid. In 2015 – 2017 average aid was around \$30 million annually, largely loans. Most aid came from regional sources, including the Asian and Islamic Development Banks, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and direct bilateral assistance from Australia, Japan and Kuwait.

The Maldives has thus far not had a programme or results-based budget, making it extremely challenging for parliament or the public to oversee and scrutinize the budget, establish accountability, and address

¹⁴ Maldives started the process for membership of RIMES and CDRI (Coalition of disaster resilient infrastructure) <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/23790>

corruption. It is also difficult to determine what is being spent on the SDGs, and what fiscal space exists for further investing in reducing inequalities (the MPI shows that the richest are thirty times richer than the poorest). In broad terms, the Maldives has committed a substantial proportion of its budget to SDG priorities, providing services such as free educational opportunity through university and healthcare for all. Now the SAP seeks to develop infrastructure to assure, for instance, that no one in the country is more than 30 minutes away from medical care. Such efforts are taking place across many sectors.

Implementation and enforcement of policies will require significant capacity building and an expansion of the public sector, requiring painful trade-offs with infrastructure investment to maintain fiscal restraint. Mobilizing domestically controlled resources held offshore is key to advancing the Maldives' future economic, social, and institutional transformation. A campaign for national development could be promoted through a coordinated donor-national partnership mechanism for the SDGs.

The government has yet to secure the resources and capacities (means of implementation) needed to implement the 2030 Agenda. COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on the Maldives' economy and fiscal reserves. Together with the UN, the Government has launched an Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF). The INFF will play an important role in bringing together the SDG policy and priorities with financing initiatives in a holistic and systematic manner across Government. A public awareness campaign about the SDGs needs to be rolled out across the country, in line with mobilizing support for the reinvigoration of a longer term national planning agenda.

Until recently there has been only limited coordination among Maldives development partners. The government is now using the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) 2019-2023 as the basis for coordination of the sectors and development partners. The UN Maldives is convening development partners and civil society organisations in line with the SDGs and the financing agenda around various SDG themes.

Challenges and gaps towards achieving the 2030 Agenda

The Maldives is in rapid transition and requires an inspiring vision of the nation's goals and identity. The SAP provides a vision for the period of the current Government (through 2023), but there is not yet consensus around key issues. These include whether to build upon traditional culture or follow a more conservative vision, challenges related to gender discrimination and inequality, the form of democracy and rule of law, and whether to build a centralised or decentralised state. An inclusive national dialogue is needed to build consensus on a common path all can accept for the Maldives of the future.

Another key challenge for the Maldives is to balance large investments needed in infrastructure gaps (to boost tourism, increase resilience to climate change and improve service delivery) and the rapid accumulation of public debt. Overall indebtedness is high and reserves low. This has been significantly worsened by COVID-19.

The decline in the birthrate offers a demographic dividend, but only if the economy can diversify and generate attractive private sector jobs. The latest employment indicators in 2019 show that 28% of males and females aged 15 - 35 are neither in employment nor education or in training (NEET), with a significant difference between men and women. Additionally, a significant difference is observed between males and females in the atolls with the NEET rate for the latter being higher. Active engagement of youth in a dynamic economy would help support women's rights and gender equality and the exclusion that feeds drug use, gangs, and extremism.

On the whole, poverty has reduced in recent years. However, many remain clustered just above the poverty line and face the risk of falling back into poverty. The Gini coefficient reveals inequality between Malé and the atolls, with almost 1 in 5 Maldivians in the southern atolls being poor (40 per cent using the MPI).

The social protection system reduces the risk of financial burden throughout the life cycle of Maldivians. However, there is a lack of inclusive development policies that facilitate participation of persons

with disabilities and elderly. The gaps in the systems results in exclusion of the most vulnerable and the absence of social protection for informal and migrant workers is a major concern. The pre-existing vulnerabilities of the migrant population in terms of health and socio-economic wellbeing, including the lack of equal access to basic rights to social protection and health services, and adequate housing, have worsened during COVID-19, particularly due to the border closures and lockdown in the greater Malé area. The mandated health insurance package most migrants prescribe to only covers inpatient care, while irregular migrants do not possess the documentation required for health coverage. Indeed, an estimated 60,000 migrants have little-to-no-access to healthcare. Moreover, migrants' large contributions to the informal sector impeded their access to the social relief packages offered by the Government.

The Maldives has a relatively young working population. Most male workers are employed, while many female workers remain outside the labour force. Youth unemployment seems to be on the rise, while low wages and existing working conditions do not attract Maldivians to many job categories. Young Maldivians also often lack skills required to access higher-paying jobs.

The Government faces a difficult landscape. The recent pandemic has exhausted the national budget due to additional expenditure on COVID-19 response and recovery work. COVID-19 expenditure report shows, as of November 2020 Government spending of MVR 2,680.7 million (US\$171m) for pandemic response and recovery.¹⁵ Due to this factor, sustainability of current level of funding by government for social, health and education sector in the coming years is at risk. It must contain recurrent spending and improve the efficiency of social spending through increased capital investments, while renewing efforts in economic and social inclusion of all regions across the country, fostering private sector job creation, building human capacities and skills and reducing vulnerability by enhancing disaster risk preparedness. And it must do so while improving public sector management and budget credibility.

Analysis of Risks¹⁶

Risk areas for which mitigating action is required by UN support broadly relate to political stability, the environment and climate change and disaster risk, economic stability and social cohesion, democratic space and the countering of the fundamentalist narrative, gender equality and discrimination. These risk areas are interlinked and have the potential to undermine progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The polarised nature of politics in the Maldives has created instability as borne out in competing national visions for the country. COVID-19 has further exacerbated this, offering critics of the government opportunities to highlight failings in the administration's response to the pandemic and seek to gain political advantage ahead of local (2021) and presidential (2023) elections. The opportunity for the government and the opposition to build a common platform for one vision for all Maldivians has not been taken. Corruption is an underlying problem which affects the country's ability to achieve the SDGs, with the Maldives ranked 130 out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.¹⁷

Growing gender inequality, increasing unemployment rates among women and signs of negative attitudes towards gender equality are serious areas of risk. Violence against women and girls in all its forms, including harmful practices, threatens to undermine inclusive development. In addition, social exclusion and discrimination, issues of youth and conservatism all hamper the ability of Maldives to capture the benefits of its demographic dividend.

¹⁵ Ministry of Finance, 2020

¹⁶ See Annex 1 matrix for more details on specific risk factors, a probability and impact rating and early warning indicators.

¹⁷ <https://www.transparency.org/country/MDV#>

External risks that could seriously affect the Maldives, and potentially become internal risks are regional power rivalries, radicalisation or terrorism. Increasing extremism is contributing to increasing gender inequality, and has implications for social cohesion and risk areas around justice and the rule of law. Maldives' geographic location also makes it vulnerable to drug trafficking and organized crime, affecting health and human lives.

Institutional instability and a limited culture of judicial independence, limited safeguards, a failure to demonstrate accountability for past abuses, the limitations of systems, and weak capacities are major risks for the justice sector. Gender justice is a critical concern as limited public confidence in the transparency and independence of the Judiciary, due to lengthy periods for cases to be processed, and a perception of limited fairness. A lack of understanding of legal rights and political polarisation are hampering the revival of public civic education on legal rights and human rights principles. Extensive reform is required in terms of infrastructural, law reform, training, and capacity building within the judiciary. Such training should include the sensitization of rights, gender disparity issues and international norms¹⁸.

Economic risks include limited workforce planning and job creation for women, youth, and populations located in specific geographical areas, missing the demographic dividend, failure to diversify, leading to severe impacts from external shocks to tourist demand, slow diversification of private sector growth, and a financial crisis caused by debt and economic costs associated with climate change and extreme events which can reduce government revenue and result in retrogression in enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. Economic instability will negatively impact on governance, social cohesion, access to services, and migration.

Limited human capacity development to match infrastructure operations and maintenance needs, and a lack of meaningful access to social services are significant risks. Climate change-driven impacts and disaster events are high risks for infrastructure which are not disaster and risk proof. Flooding events, storm surge or tsunami inundation may cause significant infrastructure damage and disruption to services. Climate change induced sea level rise may aggravate freshwater availability increasing stress on water desalination. Increasing air temperatures further increase energy demand and stress energy infrastructure. In both inhabited islands and resorts 80 per cent of the powerhouses are located within 100 metres of coastline. More than 75 per cent of telecommunication infrastructures are located within 100 metres from the coastline. The infrastructure of the two international airports is within 50 metres of the coastline. About 30 per cent of the infrastructure of Male' International Airport lies within this range and additional land reclamation done on the island towards the ocean-ward side has resulted in parts of the island being within 15 metres of the wave break zone.

Continued migration from the atolls to Malé poses challenges to the balanced development of the country. The current migration management system does not prevent the exploitation of foreign workers and minimising the number of undocumented workers, which can have labour market as well as health and security related impacts. More could be done to combat human trafficking through stricter monitoring, investigations and prosecutions of labour recruitment agencies and employers. Additionally, the Government should review the existing migrant quota system, as many undocumented migrants arrive through regular channels, only to turn irregular after employers fail to pay the visa fees.

Public health risks include growth of non-communicable diseases and mental health issues. With a high number of tourists and international migrant workers travelling into Maldives there is a risk of re-emergence of eliminated diseases or the introduction of new diseases (such as new strains of the coronavirus).

Agriculture and food safety risks include losses of arable land and food safety issues. Most food is imported, and Maldives relies on single source countries which poses a major risk for food security. There is no system to check the safety of imported food, and no control or monitoring of fertilizer use in local agriculture.

¹⁸ Review of the progress and remaining challenges in implementing the Beijing declaration and platform for action (BPfA) in the Maldives. June 2019

Environment and climate change risks are high and numerous and include rising sea levels which could lead to the potential loss of low-lying island land from sea-level rise, the risks of floods or other disasters arising from extreme weather events, exacerbated by the failure to adequately prepare, and exposure to erosion, drought and hazards, and increasingly severe impacts of climate extremes.

All these risks were evident well before COVID-19. The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic has further exposed the limited reserves and capacity that the country has available to tackle the recovery for a more resilient Maldives, in line with the 2030 Agenda. In the absence of a meaningful international agreement for supporting countries such as the Maldives to access affordable debt alleviation, and to finance the recovery taking into account a green and inclusive recovery, the country will face significant obstacles in meeting its international obligations.

Chapter 1. Country Context

The Maldives consists entirely of atolls, coral reefs, and low-lying coral islands. There are 22 geographical atolls comprising of about 1,200 islands, which are divided into 20 administrative units. By law, only about 200 islands are permanently inhabited.

The total resident population of 557,426 with 379,270 Maldivians and 178,156 foreigners¹⁹ is dispersed across 187 inhabited islands, 40 resort, and non-administrative islands²⁰. Officially, Maldivians share the same culture and speak the Dhivehi, the Maldivian language. Three geographic subgroups speak mutually intelligible dialects. Sunni Islam is the state religion, and all permanent residents must be Muslim.

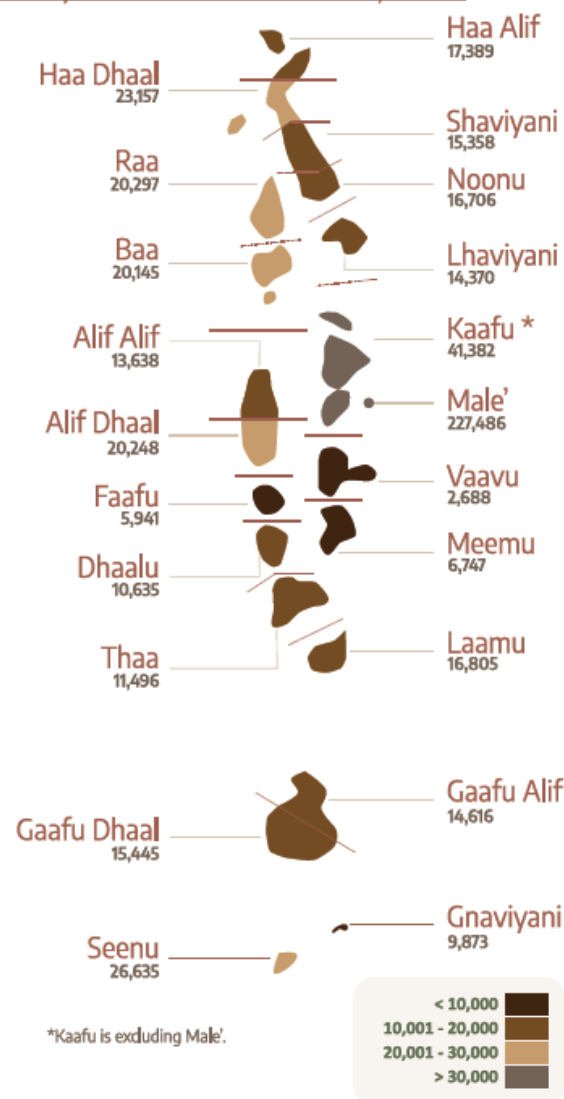
The population structure of Maldives presents a potential demographic dividend; which is the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15-64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (under 14 and over 65). In other words, it is a boost in economic productivity that occurs when there are growing numbers of people in the workforce relative to the number of dependents.

Population

The population grew at a rate of 1.65 per cent from 2006 to 402,071 persons by the 2014 Census.²¹ The mid-year population projections show that in 2021 the resident population will reach 568,362 with Maldivians representing 68 per cent (35 percent male and 33 percent female) with 32 per cent comprising foreign nationals.²² International migrant workers counted in the 2014 Census were chiefly from South Asia, and 88 per cent were male.

The birth rate has steadily declined, and the proportion of children under 15 years has decreased from 32 per cent to 28 per cent, while older persons aged 65 and above still account only for 5 per cent of the total population. With the Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (CPR) decline to 15 per cent, the Maldives has experienced a rapid fertility decline. This is an area of further research to examine other correlates of the decline including abortion, high mobility of people, STI/RTI and other RH morbidities. Abortion is illegal except under special conditions such as incest, rape, congenital deformity, thalassemic major, and to save the mothers' life. Young people under 25 years comprise 40 per cent of Maldivians (and 43 per cent of the total population, including foreigners). According to the 2014 Census, the population is concentrated in the capital city Malé with 38 per cent of the population. Similarly, most of the international migrant population is in Malé.

RESIDENT MALDIVES POPULATION PROJECTIONS BY ATOLLS, 2020



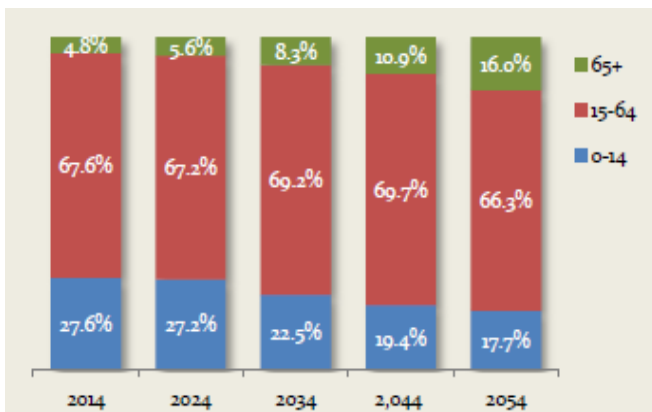
¹⁹ Statistical Pocketbook Maldives, 2020.

²⁰ Population & Development in Maldives 2019, International Conference on Population and Development, (ICPD) 25+, National Bureau of Statistics

²¹ National Bureau of Statistics (2015). Maldives Population and Housing Census 2014. Statistical release 1: Population and household, p13

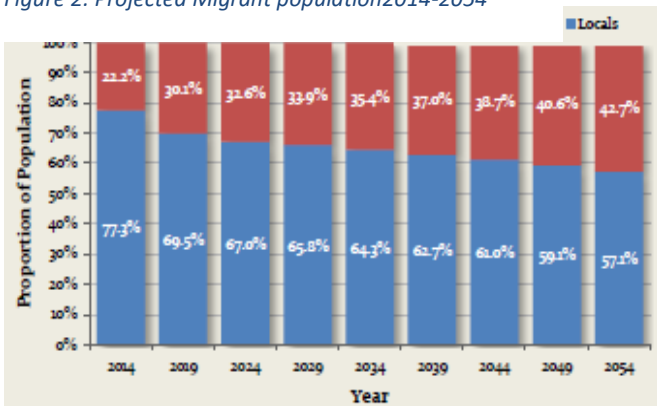
²² National Bureau of Statistics (2020) Statistical Yearbook of the Maldives 2020

Figure 1: Projected population by age group 2014-2054²³



As the Maldives reaches the end of its demographic transition, it no longer qualifies as having a very young population, despite nearly 50 per cent of all Maldivian residents being under 25 years old. This changing age structure has important potential benefits, because the economically active population is much larger than the population of young and old dependents combined.²⁴ The active adult population (15-64 years) are 68 per cent of the total population. The challenge is to capture the benefits of this demographic dividend and invest in improving youth human capital, reproductive health outcomes, and gender equality to prepare for population ageing with a productive and healthy population.

Figure 2: Projected Migrant population 2014-2054



For economic growth to occur, the younger population must have access to quality education, adequate nutrition and health (including sexual and reproductive health services and information). However, this demographic window of opportunity will be limited in time because the population will age when the country reaches the end of its demographic transition. The limited timeframe of the current demographic dividend makes it doubly urgent for Maldives to invest in quality education, jobs, and job skills, and in addressing gender inequality, and social problems youth is facing.

Population projections show that the resident population growth rate will slow over the period 2014-2054, from 4 per cent to 1.52 per cent by 2054. It is noted that the resident population consist of a huge working age population throughout the projection period mainly due to the foreign population of working age residing in the country for employment purposes.²⁵

Poverty

Maldives entered middle-income country (MIC) status less than a decade ago, having been described as a “development success story” which in 2012 was a middle-income country with a per capita income of over \$6,300 and a population of just 300,000.²⁶ The country achieved the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 1 to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015.²⁷ The Social Protection Act 2/2014 was passed in 2014 with the intention to provide social protection for the poor, reduce wealth inequality and facilitate equitable national wealth distribution.²⁸ Nevertheless, despite being the richest country by GDP in the South Asia region prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, wealth inequality is the defining trend that persists, based on the latest available data.

²³ National Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA (2016). Maldives Population Projections: Assumptions and Results Analysis.

²⁴ May J.F (2016). *Maldives population dynamics: Policy prospects for human growth and opportunity*. UNFPA: Maldives

²⁵ National Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA (2016). Maldives Population Projections: Assumptions and Results Analysis.

²⁶ *The Maldives: A Development Success Story*, The World Bank, 10 April 2013,

<http://projects-beta.worldbank.org/en/results/2013/04/10/maldives-development-success-story>

²⁷ *MDGs : Maldives Country Report 2010*, Department of National Planning, Ministry of Finance and Treasury, Government of Maldives

²⁸ Article 2, Social Protection Act 2/2014, Maldives

The Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016 reported 8.2 per cent of the population to be at the low poverty line of MVR74 (USD4.8) per day and 46.5 per cent of the population at the high poverty line of MVR148 (USD9.5).²⁹ In Maldives, more people are living in multidimensional poverty (28 per cent) than monetary poverty (6.6 per cent) live below the international poverty line of MVR 70 – US\$5.5/day).³⁰ With a more nuanced approach to measuring poverty, the 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)³¹ measures the incidence of poverty (H) that is at 28 per cent in Maldives, and the average intensity (A) at 51 per cent. The MPI, which is the product of H and A, is 0.145.³² 87 per cent of the multidimensionally poor live in the atolls, but only 13 per cent on the capital island of Malé.³³ At the national level, years of schooling contributed the most to overall poverty in Maldives at 19 per cent, and access to health contributed 16 per cent. Children have been bearing the greatest burden of poverty and have a higher likelihood of being multidimensionally poorer than any other age group, with one third of 0–17-year-old living in MPI poor households.

The largest employer, the Civil Service, provides a salary of less than MVR5000 (USD324) per month to the majority of civil servants, with just 5 per cent in that sector receiving wages above MVR10,000 (USD648) and 2 per cent earning over MVR15,000 (USD 972).³⁴ Approximately 60 per cent of the population receives than MVR 5,000 (USD 324) per person per month and less than 1 per cent receives MVR 20,000 (USD1,297) and above per person per month.³⁵

Although the last 5 years has seen growth in economic terms, this wealth has evidently not reached a large proportion of the population. Women are among the most vulnerable in the prevailing context where divorce rates are high, and the social security net is inadequate to support families in the lowest wealth quintile. According to an analysis of the 2014 Census statistics, 73 per cent of children in Maldives live with both biological parents, 20 per cent live with only mother as opposed to 1 per cent living with only father.³⁶ The single parent allowance is capped up to 3 children, and in 2015, there were 3000 single parents registered with the state receiving MVR1000 [USD65] per child under 18 years of age, up to a maximum of MVR3000 (US\$195) per family.³⁷ Data over the past 5 years show that the single parent allowance is received by 98 per cent women and 2 per cent men.³⁸ Women in such a position struggle to obtain child maintenance from the separated/divorced ex-husband, often having to resort to the courts to secure such funds. Access to justice is found to be a significant barrier for women due to the absence of legal support services, and multiple shortcomings in the justice sector.³⁹ A compounding factor is the discriminatory legal limitations on women to initiate and obtain divorce without resorting to a lengthy and complex court process.

The Maldives' HDI value for 2018 is 0.719 which put the country in the high human development category — positioning it at 104 out of 189 countries and territories.⁴⁰ Maldives' 2018 HDI is below the average of 0.750 for countries in the high human development group, but above the average of 0.642 for countries in South Asia. In South Asia, countries which are close to Maldives in 2018 HDI rank and to some extent in population size are Bhutan and Sri Lanka, which have HDIs ranked 134 and 71 respectively. Between 1995 and 2018, Maldives' HDI value increased by 31.7 per cent, from 0.546 to 0.719.

²⁹ *Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, Selected poverty related indicators*, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Treasury, Government of Maldives

³⁰ The national poverty line (half the median of total expenditures per person per day) stands at 8.2%. (1.7% in Male and 12.8% in the Atolls)

³¹ Using 2016 data

³² Multidimensional poverty has reduced to almost one third of its original value (from 0.425 in 2009 to 0.145 in 2016). Deprivation in education (years of schooling) registered the largest reduction.

³³ 10% of population in Male are multidimensionally poor whereas 40% of people in the Atolls are poor.

³⁴ Data cited by Chief Statistician Aishath Shahuda via Twitter @AishathShahuda (03 May 2019)

³⁵ *Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, Analytical Report: Household Income*, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Treasury, Government of Maldives

³⁶ *Analysis of Children in Maldives from Census 2014*, National Bureau of Statistic, Ministry of Finance & Treasury/UNICEF Maldives, pg.15

³⁷ *First couple's cash handouts to single parents spark concern*, Maldives Independent, 8 December 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y2zi633m>

³⁸ Data from Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, 2019

³⁹ *Maldivian Women's Vision Document*, UNDP Maldives, 2014

⁴⁰ UNDP (2019). Briefing note for countries on the 2019 Human Development Report: Maldives.

Economic inequality measured using the Gini Coefficient shows that inequality in Maldives is exacerbated by urbanization. Inequality in Malé is higher (at 0.284) than in the Atolls (at 0.276).⁴¹ The 'loss' in human development due to inequality is given by the difference between the HDI and the inequality adjusted HDI (IHDI) expressed as a percentage. As the inequality in a country increases, the loss in human development also increases. Maldives' HDI for 2018 falls to 0.568 when the value is discounted for inequality, a loss of 21.0 per cent due to inequality in the distribution of the HDI dimension indices. Bhutan and Sri Lanka show losses due to inequality of 27.1 per cent and 12.1 per cent respectively.

The Gender Development Index (GDI), based on the sex-disaggregated Human Development Index, is defined as a ratio of the female to the male HDI. The GDI measures gender inequalities in achievement in three basic dimensions of human development: health (measured by female and male life expectancy at birth), education (measured by female and male expected years of schooling for children and mean years for adults aged 25 years and older) and command over economic resources (measured by female and male estimated GNI per capita). The 2018 female HDI value for Maldives is 0.689 in contrast with 0.734 for males, resulting in a GDI value of 0.939⁴² indicating that women continue to lag their male counterparts in human development. GDI values for Bhutan and Sri Lanka are 0.893 and 0.938 respectively.

Maldives has been a remarkable and sustained development success, based primarily on the development of high-end tourism. Over the last 40 years, interrupted only by the 2004 tsunami, it has experienced transformative growth, along with development of the country's infrastructure, services and connectivity that has brought improved living conditions to every inhabited island.

Ubiquitous public services have generated impressive health and education results, with a literacy rate approaching 100 per cent, and average life expectancy of 85 years for women and 79 years for men⁴³.

The country's GDP per capita - only \$200 in 1978 -reached \$10,790 in 2019. From a Least Developed Country it has quickly progressed to Upper-Middle Income Country status. Real GDP grew by 6.7 per cent in 2018, with strong performances in tourism, construction, and trade. While this is so, it must be noted the GDP growth masks inequalities between social groups and geographic regions.

The [Human Development Index](#)⁴⁴ and [Multidimensional Poverty Index](#)⁴⁵ reveals stark systemic inequalities across regions in the Maldives. Maldives' [Human Development Index \(HDI\)](#) for 2018 was at 0.719, placing Maldives in the high human development category, ranking 104 out of 189 countries⁴⁶. While the gap in basic standards is narrowing, a next generation of inequalities is opening in the Maldives, particularly around an urban-rural divide, technology, education, and the climate crisis. The MPI for the Maldives stands at 0.145.⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, income-poverty ratios are 20 percent lower than multidimensional poverty headcount ratios across regions. COVID-19 exposed the extreme vulnerability of the urban city in Malé, due to high density, limited space, and lack of decent accommodations, where over 750 high-risk temporary accommodations are being monitored by the health authority⁴⁸. Access to health services and most government administrative services were based on travel to Malé pre-COVID-19. However, with the lockdown and travel restrictions, several people living in the outer islands faced challenges to travel within the atolls and to Malé.

The opening of new resorts, housing and infrastructure (led by expansion of the international airport and development of a connecting bridge) have fuelled the construction sector since 2014, and a slow rate of growth in the sector could be attributed to the completion of some large infrastructure projects, most of which

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² UNDP (2019). 2019 Human Development Report: Maldives

⁴³ Statistical Yearbook of Maldives, 2020, Table 3.6, National Bureau of Statistics

⁴⁴ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MDV>

⁴⁵ http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Multidimensional-Poverty-in-Maldives-2020_4th-june.pdf

⁴⁶ [Human Development Report 2019, Maldives country notes](#).

⁴⁷ The MPI index ranges between 0 and 1 where values closer to 1 refer to higher levels of multidimensional poverty.

⁴⁸ [Health Protection Agency Dashboard](#), Maldives.

were carried out off-budget. Maldives' inherent development challenges stem from potential risks from climate change, vulnerability to disasters and challenges in ensuring environmental sustainability with expansion of construction on land and filling of lagoons, and rising levels of solid waste. Almost half of all settlements, and over two thirds of critical infrastructure are located within 100 metres of the shoreline, and are under immediate threat from rising sea levels.

The additional challenge of the country's atoll-based geography is of its dispersed small communities across many small islands, which makes service delivery difficult and very costly, and can limit opportunities for job creation and economic diversification. In addition, reliance on foreign professionals especially doctors and teachers makes it challenging to retain them. Compounded by changes in family structure towards nuclear living arrangements, increasing Islamic conservatism and inclusion issues, this has caused relatively elevated levels of youth unemployment and low rates of women participating in the workforce.

The country has experienced social stress as a result of rapid modernization, recent democratisation, and the effects of globalization. The capacities of the judiciary and independent institutions have not developed apace with these developmental changes. There also appears to be only a partial understanding of rights among the public, with demands for public benefits leading politicians to seek to please voters with unsustainable programs, without full consideration as to the best course of action. Maldives seeks to promote individual's rights, but it has not yet inculcated a sense of civic responsibility.⁴⁹ This has led to increased inequality, political polarization and populist policy responses. New issues include youth alienation, drug use, sexual exploitation and abuse, and gangs, an epidemiological transition from infectious to chronic disease and mental health issues, and the emergence of extremist religious ideology.

To respond to these challenges, the current government has reversed centralisation policies of the previous government, promising to empower local councils by allocating them a portion of the annual state budget and to develop at least 5 regional hubs across the archipelago. The government has embarked on reforms to restore democratic institutions and the freedom of the press, re-establish the justice system, and protect fundamental human rights. Also high on the government's agenda are social issues and climate change.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global recession is creating an unprecedented health and socioeconomic impact on the Maldives. The number of infected cases has increased to [16,056, with 52 deaths](#), as of 1 February 2021⁵⁰. The sudden halt of international tourism brought an unprecedented economic shock, severely weakening the fiscal and external position, threatening the economic and developmental gains in the Maldives, and increasing food insecurity due to disruptions in the supply chain. Social and livelihoods costs to people are immense: children's learning are severely affected, and people have lost incomes and require urgent protection. The Government reprioritized its Strategic Action Plan (2019-2023) and identified essential key policies and sectors for economic recovery and to build resilience.

Political Situation and Trends

The Constitution adopted by the Maldives in 2008 heralded an entirely open and liberal constitutional democracy with genuine universal adult suffrage and an extensive Bill of Rights enforceable by an independent judiciary. This radically new set of values and rules was not fully internalised by political stakeholders or Maldivian society. The decade after 2008 saw a succession of political confrontations and crises, often involving the Supreme Court. An assessment of judicial reform concluded that the inexperienced and poorly trained judiciary had proved incapable of assuming the role envisioned in the 2008 Constitution, guiding inexperienced constitutional organs through their awkward early days in a constitutional democracy⁵¹.

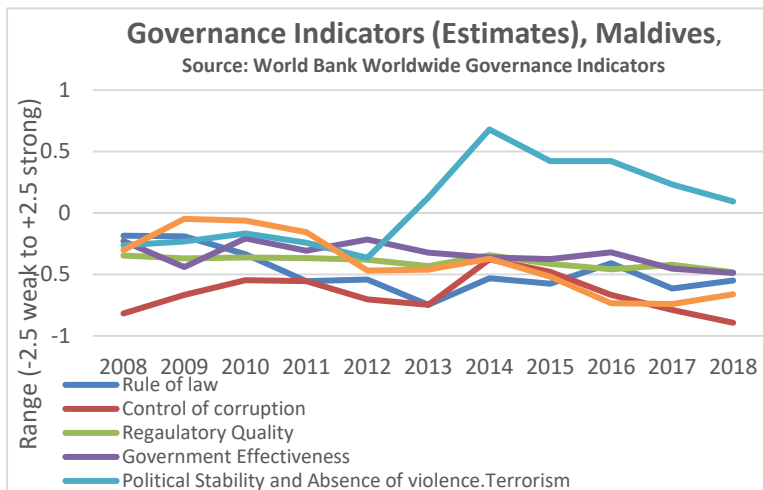
⁴⁹ Stakeholder meeting, Attorney General Office.

⁵⁰ [Health Protection Agency Covid-19 Dashboard](#), retrieved on 30 November 2020.

⁵¹ UNDP (2019). *Assessment of the Justice Sector Reform Proposals*: Final Report (unpublished)

The 2018 Presidential elections resulted in a change of government, and 2019 Parliamentary elections provided a two thirds majority to the new ruling coalition which adopted an ambitious programme of reforms. While the constitution maintains a division of functions among Executive, Parliament and the Judiciary, current judicial reforms are directed by the Executive and the Parliament through their representatives in the Judicial Service Commission. One landmark intervention in 2019 has been the full replacement of the Supreme Court bench, with potential consequences yet to emerge for both building trust and national reconciliation.

Figure 3: Governance Indicators



While the country is enjoying a period of relative calm and political stability, potential sparks could ignite political turbulence in the country, namely the fragility of arrangements within coalition governments and polarisation over social and political issues. Weaknesses in the institutionalisation of the political party system in the Maldives could lead to instability in the lead-up to presidential elections as personality-based politics could once more take centre stage.

The Constitution also paved the way for decentralised governance. The 2010 Decentralisation Act details the objectives to allow island communities to make their own decisions in a democratic and accountable manner, to improve people’s living standards through social, economic and cultural development, and to create an environment conducive for peace and prosperity. A review of decentralised governance⁵² in 2018 identified challenges as lack of political will to implement decentralisation, in particular, fiscal decentralisation, the politicisation of local government authorities, and lack of capacity of some local councils, and conflict with the administrative staff, who are accountable to the civil service rather than the council.

Amendments were made to the Decentralisation Act in 2019, including provisions for one third representation of women the councils and allocation of 40 per cent of government revenues from the atoll jurisdiction to its council. While these amendments addressed some of the legal issues, challenges related to capacity at atoll level, politicisation and conflict with administrative civil service staff remain.

COVID-19 impact on democratic governance

As attention and resources were diverted to emergency health and frontline workers, services to vulnerable groups, including women and girls, were impacted (such as emergency security and safety, social protection, and state services). Delays in courts, prosecutions, and proceedings, further impact vulnerable groups. The Prosecutor General’s office initiated the possibility of virtual court hearings with the agreement of the defendants, in order to ensure that the justice system continued during the pandemic. A total of 46 cases on sexual assault were submitted during just the first three months of the lockdown. However, delays in court proceedings have impacted both public perception of, and access to justice.

Local government elections were delayed for one year, and current council members being extended until the election (after January 2021). Delayed implementation of devolution of power, particularly the implementation of 33 percent seats reserved for women at local level, centralized decisions on COVID-19

⁵² Transparency Maldives (2019). Review of the decentralisation framework in the Maldives

response, and reduced local budget allocation could risk disempowering local government. Lockdown and various restrictions witnessed 113 women withdrawing their candidacy (as at mid December 2020). On a positive note, the restrictions of movement between the capital, Malé, and islands has witnessed an increase in decentralized working of local councils. As a result, capacity gaps were highlighted throughout this period, for which digitalization and strengthened e-governance measures could, in part, support the closing of these gaps. Disruptions to public services have created an avenue for increased decentralization, as councils were forced to take emergency measures to provide essential services, showing the importance of digitalization, empowering councils, and strengthening decentralized public service provision.

COVID-19 restrictions have created an avenue for radicalized groups and violent extremism to rise, echoing the events unfolding following the tsunami of 2004⁵³. This was notably marked by the first official confirmed case of terrorism by the Islamic State in the Maldives. The Maldives Police Service reported a 200 per cent increase in suspected cases of violent extremism, compared to the same period in the previous year, and a 42 per cent increase in the number of confirmed cases of violent extremism from January-May 2020⁵⁴. Findings from recent research (not yet published) provides evidence of these deepening vulnerabilities, the growing 'us vs them' divide in the Maldives and threats to social cohesion, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁵

Gender equality

The Maldives achieved five out of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) ahead of target and effectively eradicated extreme poverty.⁵⁶ However, gender inequality ranked high among the three remaining MDGs. Achieving gender equality and gender parity is critical to realizing the Agenda 2030.

The Maldives has a history of relative gender equality influenced by a strong tradition of women's self-employment, egalitarian cultural ideologies and flexible marriage and divorce practices.⁵⁷ Whereas women in the Maldives are among the best off in South Asia by many standards, they still suffer considerable inequality.⁵⁸ While the country performs well in measures of health and reproductive care, it performs poorly compared with similar countries in terms of political and socio-economic empowerment. The country has a particularly low representation of women in national and local governments⁵⁹, low participation in the workforce, and now experiences high levels of inequality, with a growing gap between the rich and the poor.

The Strategic Action Plan⁶⁰ "recognizes the importance of gender as a governance issue and advocates policies on increasing women in decision making and participation in public life to achieve an inclusive, balanced and peaceful society. The policy priorities of subsector centers on increasing women's representation in decision making, minimizing sexual harassment, domestic violence, eliminating barriers for women to participate in economic activity including cultural barriers by promoting shared care work and household responsibilities."⁶¹ Women's participation in local governance is mandated by law. The Decentralization Act highlights the importance of women's roles in local decision making and development by mandating the establishment of an island Women's Development Committee (WDCs) under each island council. The WDCs perform advisory functions to island councils on development concerns. The Act recognizes the role of non-government

⁵³ Reference is made to the findings of the [Youth Vulnerability Report 2018](#).

⁵⁴ Maldives Police Service Statistics retrieved in June 2020.

⁵⁵ 'Values in Crisis or VIC'55 undertaken by the Maldives National University with UNDP (to be published in early 2021)

⁵⁶ Drawn in part from Shadiya Ibrahim, *Maldivian Women's Rights*, March 2017

⁵⁷ Fulu, E. *Domestic Violence in Asia – Globalization, Gender, and Islam in the Maldives*, 2014, Introduction.

⁵⁸ The various Human Development Indices developed by the UNDP show significant gender differences in the Maldives when it comes to economic opportunity and empowerment. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/MDV.pdf and http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/MDV.pdf

⁵⁹ There are some notable improvements in some instances though. <https://en.sun.mv/61297>

⁶⁰ The Gender Equality Act (18/2016) seeks to prevent discrimination based on gender and to address ideas and practices that promote gender discrimination, while ensuring that women are guaranteed equal rights and opportunities in economic, political, civil, social and cultural life including access to reproductive health information and services.

⁶¹ Strategic Action Plan, p420.

organizations in governance at the local level and opens opportunities for constructive engagement with local government bodies on various concerns including gender.

While many Maldivian women are well-educated and proficient to take on leadership roles, they are not well represented in the top levels of society, business⁶² or government. Women's engagement in politics and other leadership activities is limited. Only 35 of the 386 candidates standing for parliamentary election in 2018 were women, and only 4 were elected (11 per cent of those who stood for election) compared to 83 men (24 per cent of those who stood for election).⁶³ Women are filtered by party primaries limiting their competition, and lack of support from family members, limited political connections and financial resources are further barriers to participation.⁶⁴ Socio-cultural beliefs, economic disadvantage, and the burden of women's traditional roles in the home are further constraints.⁶⁵ Transparency Maldives noted "a striking technical knowledge gap in effective campaigning, lobbying, fundraising, budgeting, legislative drafting, constituency relations, and public speaking," which impacts on women's interest and confidence in running for political positions.⁶⁶ Whilst women perform better in education, this is not reflected in their representation in public life.

Despite the allocation of one third of seats to women in the local councils, women are underrepresented in the judiciary, parliament, and local governing bodies. Other institutions are male dominated, as are the leading areas of the economy, particularly tourism and fishing, which almost exclusively employ men.

The Gender Equality Act (2016) seeks to prevent discrimination based on gender, and to address ideas and practices that promote gender discrimination, while ensuring that women are guaranteed equal rights and opportunities in economic, political, civil, social and cultural life including access to reproductive health information and services. While the Act prohibits discrimination based on marital status, most health facilities outside of Male are not providing contraceptives to unmarried people and spousal consent was included in older versions of the national family planning standards.

The Maldives is a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The cabinet has endorsed withdrawal of reservations to Article 16 (1) b, e, f, g & h, and full withdrawal to reservations to Article 16 (2). However, reservations are expected to remain on Article 16 (1) a, c, and d relating to inequality in entering marriage, divorce, and parental rights, where Maldivian women face discriminatory laws, policies, and practices. Under the Constitution, the laws governing marriage do not confer equitable rights to women. According to the Citizenship Act, marriage by a foreigner to a national does not confer any right to apply for nationality. The Law also envisages that an applicant for Maldivian nationality should renounce his/her citizenship, thus making him/her stateless if Maldivian Citizenship is not granted.

Removing the reservation to Article 16 (2) addressing the minimum age of marriage and registration is a positive step by the government. However, this could potentially lead to an increase in unregistered marriages including child marriages, given the increase in conservative religious beliefs – a number of fatwas have been issued by religious scholars on recognizing marriages outside the legal system as long as they meet the minimum requirements of Sharia Law. This is further exacerbated by a lack of a proper monitoring system.

A withdrawal of all reservations to Article 16 would allow the government to align its interpretation of the Sharia on matters relating to Article 16 of the Convention with practices of countries with similar religious backgrounds and legal systems that have successfully harmonized their national legislation with international human rights obligations.

⁶² Numbers of women in managerial positions are also low (at 19.5 per cent) and women earn 20 per cent less than men. Across the country, women have significantly less assets and financial capacity than men, to be used as collateral to obtain bank loans for small and medium enterprises.

⁶³ Reports of the Commonwealth Observer Group, Maldives Parliamentary Elections 6 April 2019, p.24, https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/MaldivesFinalReport_13-06-19.pdf accessed 12 December 2019.

⁶⁴ UNDP - Women's Political Participation in the Maldives, February 2017 accessed 12 December 2019

⁶⁵ 214 Reports of the Commonwealth Observer Group, Maldives Parliamentary Elections 6 April 2019, p.24,

⁶⁶ Transparency Maldives (2019), 'Women's Political Representation', Position Paper, Issue 01, 10 February

In the 2015 review of the Maldives, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommended the Government to “adopt strategies, including awareness-raising and educational campaigns for the general public, targeting in particular girls and women, parents and teachers, as well as conduct dialogues, forums and consultations with religious leaders aimed at the promotion of non-stereotypical and positive images of women and establish a baseline and clear indicators to measure the progress and results of such strategies.” During the sixty-ninth session of the CEDAW in March 2018, the general recommendation No 37 highlighted the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change. Women, girls, men and boys are affected differently by climate change and disasters, with many women and girls experiencing greater risks, burdens and impacts.⁶⁷

Maldives submitted its 6th State report on CEDAW in April 2019⁶⁸ and a reply to the list of issues and questions in relation to its report in 2020. Key challenges identified included limited inter-ministerial coordination in the implementation of the rapidly changing national legal and regulatory frameworks, including information to local authorities across the islands, lack of harmonized monitoring, and inadequate financial and technical resources including high turnover of staff and limited public awareness on issues influencing gender equality.

A further reason for growing gender inequality is a reduction in women working outside the home. Historically, women held a strong economic position in the country, responsible for drying, salting and preserving fish after the men delivered the haul to the shore.⁶⁹ With the industrialization of fish processing and with an increase in fresh fish exports, there has been a sharp decrease in women’s role in the industry. The influx of international migrant labour has also contributed to displacement of Maldivian women from industries such as tailoring and agriculture, with the industrialisation of these industries.

Women have become increasingly under-represented in the labor market, which in turn reduces their economic independence and stand up against violent relationships.⁷⁰ Very few women participate in the tourism sector,⁷¹ because it is viewed as inappropriate for a woman to travel to other islands and work around tourists who drink alcohol and dress scantily. Although the tourism industry dominates the country’s economy, women constitute only 7 per cent of the tourism labor force. Women suffer disproportionately high unemployment levels with a large proportion considered economically inactive. Women with disabilities are further marginalized⁷². Being financially reliant on their husbands, women have less social mobility and less decision-making power, and less opportunities to leave abusive and violent relationships.

About 39 per cent of Maldivian households are female headed, with poverty rates slightly higher than for male headed households.⁷³ Households headed by females have poverty rates of 8.8% while those headed by males have poverty rates of 7.8 per cent. These higher poverty rates are most likely associated with differences in labor market characteristics of females. For example, labor force participation rate for women is 45.6 per cent compared to 77.1 per cent for men. The highest contribution to multidimensional poverty for women is from health, indicating lack of access. Women are also in lower paying jobs and engaged in informal and small enterprises. Additionally, unpaid care work by women is not considered and its contribution to the economy is unaccounted for. The Maldives 2016 National Transfer Accounts (NTA) indicates that prime age women spend almost 100 hours per week on paid market work and unpaid care work. However, time spent on unpaid housework is valued much less with women spending triple the amount of time than men. According to the

⁶⁷ http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/37&Lang=en

⁶⁸ Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (April 2019). Sixth Periodic Report on the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women.

⁶⁹ El-Horr, J. and Pande, R. *Understanding Gender in the Maldives: Toward Inclusive Development*, World Bank Group, 2016, page 14.

⁷⁰ Fulu, E. and Miedema, S. Violence Against Women: Globalizing the Integrated Ecological Model, *Violence Against Women* 2015, Vol. 21(12) 1435, <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1077801215596244>> accessed 23 October 2019.

⁷¹ www.un.org.mv/un-news-room/maldivian-womens-rights/ accessed 2 October 2019.

⁷² At present there is a lack of data disaggregated by disability and gender.

⁷³ National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance & Treasury, Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), Analytical Report IV, Poverty and Inequality, National Bureau of Statistics, 2016, Malé, Maldives, p.40.

NTA, unpaid work contributes 8.6 - 17.8 billion Maldivian Rufiyaa (US\$559m-1.16b) to the economy which when added to the GDP at market costs would be at 14.9 per cent and at opportunity cost increase to 27.3 per cent. This indicates a significant contribution to the country's GDP.

The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGFSS) has taken some steps to counter growing gender inequality. Since 2016, MoGFSS holds an annual event, "Girls Lead Initiative", to motivate girls to achieve their goals. This initiative however has not been widely publicised. In 2018, the Ministry expanded the activity to a six-day programme to promote the rights of the girl child and raise awareness on the challenges faced by girls within communities. In addition, activities were held to foster girls' interest for non-traditional roles as well as to provide career guidance from women working in sectors where women are largely under-represented.⁷⁴

The reported prevalence of intimate partner violence in the Maldives (at 16.3 per cent)⁷⁵ is lower than in other South Asian countries (except for Bhutan) due to a history of gender egalitarian norms, laws and traditions, historically highly flexible divorce practices (meaning that women can escape violent relationships more easily), a high level of female headed households and a traditionally moderate form of Islam, which does not discriminate against women or view them as inferior.⁷⁶ Increasing radicalisation in the country has accompanied an upward trend in anecdotal information on domestic violence. Globally, all countries, including the Maldives, have experienced an increase in domestic and gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the real scope of this crisis is yet to be reported.

As the country transitions through a period of rapid social change, it is critical that gender equality is realized, and that women's rights are upheld. The newfound democratic space has paradoxically created openings for more conservative and even extreme thinking and practices. Though official figures are not available, there have been increased reports of child marriage, which are not recognised by courts, and which have been linked with increasingly extreme ideologies. Generating a similar space for the promotion of women's rights and creating policies to solidify the gains achieved is essential for inclusive and sustainable development.

Human Rights Situation

The present administration has increased engagement with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and various UN human rights mechanisms. It has been a receptive and accessible interlocutor and reiterated its commitments to human rights. The government maintains an open invitation to all human rights mandate holders to visit the country.⁷⁷

The UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, during her visit to the Maldives in 2019, noted that fundamentalism is one of the greatest threats to the rich culture of the Maldives, including Maldivian practices of Islam. She noted that fundamentalist ideology has resulted in violence, including the disappearances and killings of dissenting voices, with some fearing recurrence despite recent political changes. She recommended that the Government respond clearly, unequivocally, and regularly against fundamentalist ideology and called for a clear counternarrative to the fundamentalist narrative from a diversity of voices. She further noted that the education system as a key sphere for promoting tolerance and human rights, recommending the Maldives to introduce human rights education to emphasize the diversity of cultural expressions and the values of tolerance and mutual understanding.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Gender and Family, Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children, Women, Elderly and Persons with Disabilities, 2013-2018.

⁷⁵ The Ministry of Gender and Family, Government of Maldives, The Maldives Study on Women's Health and Life Experiences, Initial results on prevalence health outcomes and women's responses to violence, 2006, vii.

⁷⁶ Fulu, E. *Domestic Violence in Asia – Globalisation, Gender and Islam in the Maldives*, 2014, quoted in Fulu, E. and Miedema, S. *Violence Against Women: Globalizing the Integrated Ecological Model*, *Violence Against Women* 2015, Vol. 21(12) 1431–1455, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1077801215596244> accessed 22.10.19.

The Government acknowledges the presence of violent extremism and its adverse impacts on vulnerable groups such as women and children in the Maldivian society and remains committed to eliminating these influences through law enforcement and raising awareness. The National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism should provide the security and preventative measures needed to reduce risks and build social cohesion. Repatriation and rehabilitation of foreign fighters and their family members is a Government priority, emphasizing deradicalization, psycho-social support and vocational training.

Civil Society and non-profit organisations are integral to the country's development. Strengthening civic space is a must if active participation of all citizens is to be achieved, in line with the vision of the SAP. The ban on a prominent civic human rights organization, Maldivian Democracy Network, is a reminder of how vulnerable human rights groups and human rights defenders remain in the Maldives.⁷⁸⁷⁹ However civil society must become an active partner in the country's efforts to overcome the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aiming to strengthen the legal framework governing associations, a revised Associations Bill was submitted to Parliament in 2019, superseding the Associations Act of 2003. This legislation aims to enhance the governance of associations and provide an improved mechanism of accountability that focuses on due process and upholding fundamental freedoms. New Bills on freedom of expression and freedom of press⁸⁰ are in draft.

The Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM) has major capacity and technical expertise gaps. The public approval rating of HRCM has dropped from 39.9 per cent in 2005 to 27 per cent in 2019. The proportion of people who thought that the role of HRCM was to protect human rights had declined from 70 per cent in 2011 to 42.8 per cent in 2019.⁸¹ Legislative amendments to strengthen the independent functioning of the HRCM, Elections Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, Judicial Service Commission, Civil Service Commission, Auditor General and the Prosecutor General, contain provisions to ensure that the members of these institutions act independently and uphold strict ethical standards.

The SAP's legislative agenda identifies over 200 laws to be enacted or amended. In 2019 the Act on Presidential Commissions, Legal Professions Act, Heritage Act, Whistle Blower Protection Act, Juvenile Justice Act, CRPA and Second Amendment to the Prevention of Terrorism Act were enacted. The Gender Equality Act, Criminal Procedure Act, National Wage Policy Act, and the Act to repeal the Defamation Act were recently adopted.

The Judiciary has been tainted by long-standing allegations of corruption, political influence and inefficiency. The Government's vision is to establish an independent judiciary that is accountable, accessible to the public, upholds fundamental freedoms and serves justice in a timely manner. The first step of implementing judicial reforms was an assessment on the deficiencies of the judiciary, and the feasibility of implementing proposals for justice sector reform. The assessment⁸² revealed the urgent need to restore DJA's autonomy, establish an efficient case management system, ensure effective implementation of rules of conduct for judges and highlighted the need for gender parity within the judiciary. The absence of a continuing legal education regime affects the competency of judges and quality of justice.

Although Government prioritizes empowerment of women at all levels, significant efforts are needed to ensure gender equality and effective protection of women⁸³. Despite positive developments such as the appointment of the first female justices of the Maldives Supreme Court⁸⁴, women are still largely underrepresented in the Maldives' judiciary, parliament, and local governing bodies.

⁷⁸ The Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) was banned by authorities in 2019 against a backdrop of threats to the MDN's staff from conservative groups which alleged that the MDN's 2015 report, "Preliminary Assessment of Radicalization in the Maldives", insulted the Prophet Muhammad.

⁷⁹ CIVICUS Monitor, an index which tracks civic space globally, rates Maldives civic space as obstructed, a medium ranking out of five possible ratings.

⁸⁰ Note in the World Press Freedom Index 2020, Maldives ranked 79 out of 180, an improvement of 19 places on the previous year.

⁸¹ UNDP & HRCM, The "Rights Side of Life", Third Report, final draft January 2020, page 34.

⁸² National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 - Human Rights Council, Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Thirty-sixth session, 4-15 May 2020, Maldives, page 14. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/MVIndex.aspx>

⁸³ Gender Equality Policy was endorsed by the President's Office in September 2019 and formulation of a Gender Equality Action Plan is underway.

⁸⁴ In September 2019, for the first time ever, two female justices were appointed to the Supreme Court of Maldives.

Torture is considered a separate criminal offence under the Anti-Torture Act (13/2013) and Penal Code (6/2014) and the Prison and Parole Act (14/2013). From 2008 to 2017 the Human Rights Commission (HRCM) investigated 630 alleged cases of torture.⁸⁵ These included complaints related to arbitrary detention, search or seizure without a reasonable cause, denial of rights to legal counsel, right to be brought before a judge within twenty-four hours, right not to be detained without a valid reason, delay in prosecution and investigation, inhumane treatment of persons and conditions of detention facilities. During the last three years HRCM has investigated 11 cases where children were allegedly subjected to torture. None of these cases have been forwarded for prosecution due to insufficient evidence.⁸⁶

The material conditions of all prisons are seriously inadequate, but particularly so for juveniles. Juveniles in detention are not segregated from adults, or according to the seriousness of alleged crimes. They do not receive any rehabilitation services⁸⁷, nor access to education or psychosocial support while in detention. Moreover, the prison lacked a regulation for administration of disciplinary action against juveniles. With regard to public perception of the prison service, in 2019, 24.8 per cent indicated general dissatisfaction with the performance of prisons services with cited reasons being corruption (10.7 per cent), lack of supervision (5.2 per cent), abuse (4.2 per cent) and torture (2.5 per cent) of prisoners.⁸⁸

The Government has revived the role of the Inspector of Correctional Services as an efficient oversight body, by guaranteeing increased access to prisons and custodial facilities. A hotline has also been established for families of detainees to lodge complaints, allowing them remote and enhanced accessibility.

Ensuring the independence of the Maldivian Judiciary to attain speedy and quality delivery of justice was one of the most important reform measures conducted by the Government in 2019. Numerous achievements have been made to instill public confidence in the judicial system. There is an urgent need to ensure the independence of the court's internal administration, the importance of impartial and efficient functioning of the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) and the need to ensure gender parity within the judiciary.⁸⁹ During 2019, five Supreme Court Justices were investigated for abuse of power and professional breach of conduct, and four of the Justices were impeached by an overwhelming majority in the Parliament. The first female Justices were appointed to the Supreme Court of Maldives in 2019, followed by a complete reconstitution of the Supreme Court's bench of Justices. A full appraisal of all sitting Judges by the JSC is ongoing.

In 2019, Maldives acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure, and the Government has implemented significant steps to strengthen the legal framework pertaining to the protection of children. A reconstituted Child Rights Protection Act (CRPA) enacted in November 2019 clarifies the rights of the child, responsibilities of parents in ensuring the protection and wellbeing of the child, and establishes State apparatus to ensure the protection and unhindered provisions of the rights stipulated in the Act. The CRPA provides for the establishment of a Child Rights Protection Council, and the Child and Family Protection Services. It further institutes a Children's Ombudsperson to oversee the implementation of the Act. The first Children's Ombudsperson was appointed in July 2020.

In order to ensure special protection for children in conflict with the law within the criminal justice system, the Juvenile Justice Act was enacted on 20 November 2019. The Act prioritizes rehabilitation and introduces diversion mechanisms, and for all minors currently in detention will be redirected unto diversion mechanisms. The Act mandates establishment of specific departments within MPS and PGO, with trained staff.

⁸⁵Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (October 2018). Submission from the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives for information on the initial report submitted by Maldives under Article 19 of Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

⁸⁶ *ibid*

⁸⁷The revised organizational structure of Maldives Correctional Service has established a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Command. Efforts are also underway to develop an all-inclusive rehabilitation center within the largest prison establishment in the Maldives. This will enable the engagement of many the prison population in rehabilitation programs.

⁸⁸ *ibid*

⁸⁹ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), August 2020.

Furthermore, criminal cases involving minors shall only be heard at Juvenile Courts by specially trained judges, and the Department of Juvenile Justice will be mandated with implementing the Act.

Despite these reforms, the Government acknowledges numerous deficits in the system which compromises the safety of women and children. In 2019, 1241 cases of violence against children, including sexual abuse of children and 433 cases of gender-based violence were reported and attended to by MoGFSS. 790 cases of crimes against women were investigated by the Maldives Police Service, but only 68 were sent to the Prosecutor General's office. Although Government efforts are hindered by the lack of mobile resources and technical staff, extensive efforts are undertaken through the Family Children Service Centers (FCSCs) in 19 atolls to provide protection to women and children, out of which four shelters are designated for domestic violence survivors. Operationalizing state care shelters is a Government priority as defined in the SAP.

The CRPA includes new provisions to protect children from discrimination, bias, harm, cruel punishment, neglect and physical and emotional abuse, and to ensure the right to education and health care, as well as special provisions to protect the rights of children with special needs. The definition of a child from conception to 18 is problematic as it is not aligned with the rights of women, especially Sexual Health and Reproductive Health (SHRH). The law makes health protection measures such as vaccination of children mandatory and raises the legal age of consent for marriage to 18 years and protects children below 15 years of age from all regular judicial punishments. The Juvenile Justice Act (18/2019) outlines the rights of children and adolescents coming in conflict with the law and means to prevent juvenile delinquency.⁹⁰ It prescribes swift resolution of cases and rehabilitation, through a Department of Juvenile Justice, a specialised police department to address juvenile cases, designated State Prosecutors for children, a probation and corrections unit, a juvenile diversion programme, rehabilitation programmes, and residential facilities and correctional centres. The law prohibits the death penalty for minors. The provisions of these two laws largely remain to be implemented.

The Education Bill and Higher Education Bill were submitted to the Parliament in December 2019 with the aim of strengthening the legal framework governing education in Maldives. Having achieved near-universal literacy rate, Maldives should continue prioritizing provision of quality education at all levels without any discrimination, offering equal opportunities to all citizens, including persons with disabilities (PWDs). Removing obstacles to ensure PWDs' mobility and access to education facilities needs to be strengthened. Additional efforts need to be reinforced to seek technical assistance to develop alternative pathways that can accommodate dropouts and children in conflict with the law.

Maldives has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and national legislation was passed in 2010. The SAP includes numerous policies to increase employability of and physical accessibility for PWDs, enhance accessibility to medical treatments, and strengthen social protection programmes. The Constitution ensures special assistance to elderly and disadvantaged people and emphasizes the principle of non-discrimination based on mental or physical disability.

The Disability Act established a Disability Council, mandated to oversee the implementation of its provisions. Efforts are underway to strengthen enforcement of the Act and review the structure of the Council. Despite legislation in this area, there has been limited action towards the inclusion of PWDs in national social and economic development. In the absence of primary data indicating the types and geographical distribution of PWDs in Maldives, stakeholder institutions are unable to effectively devise and conduct skills and development programmes in a timely manner. The register of PWDs maintained by NSPA is incomplete and burdensome, as it places the onus on PWDs to get registered through voluntary initiation. The SAP includes the development of a National Registry of PWDs by 2023.

⁹⁰ Aboobakuru Z N (2017). A Maldivian perspective on juvenile justice. In Resource material series no. 102. UNAFEI.

The MoGFSS is formulating a classification guideline for PWDs, to enable stakeholders to better attend to the needs of PWDs country wide. Physical access to buildings, roads and centralized healthcare continue to be a challenge for PWDs. The Building Code adopted in 2019 mandates all public service buildings to designate access routes for PWDs requiring wheelchair access. Currently, a monthly allowance of MVR 2000 (USD 130) is given to all PWDs registered with NSPA. By 2018, 7771 PWDs were registered to receive the allowance across Maldives. Limited sexual and reproductive health information and services are accessible for PWDs.

With respect to migrant workers, following the enactment of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act, the National Steering Committee on Human Trafficking was established in 2016. The Government finalised the National Anti-Human Trafficking Action Plan in 2019. This Action Plan endorsed by the Cabinet in February 2020 came into effect on 30 March 2020, aiming to accelerate the elimination of trafficking in persons in Maldives. Due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19, the Government reprioritised the plan. The Committee's priorities for 2020 include setting up a dedicated office for Trafficking in Persons, setting up a permanent shelter for Victims of Trafficking and conducting a public awareness campaign.

In 2019, Maldives Immigration forwarded 27 cases of suspected fraudulent recruitment and human trafficking to MPS for further investigation and charges were raised against 4 individuals (trials ongoing). In February 2019, 24 recruitment companies were blacklisted on the Expat Online System. MED has ceased provision of all administrative services to these companies. Lack of technical expertise in investigation, prosecution and within the judiciary continue to impede successful prosecutions. Limited availability of translators, lack of legal representation in courts and delay in prosecution, have resulted in the infringement of victims' rights. Budgetary constraints, the absence of a permanent shelter, and victim support also pose obstacles to effectively combatting human trafficking.

Efforts are underway to enact necessary legislative amendments to align the definition of human trafficking with the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol, and to revise the composition of the National Steering Committee on Human Trafficking. The Regularization Programme initiated for migrant workers in September 2019 allows the Government to identify and attend to victims of human trafficking. Two victims who were housed in a temporary shelter have now been allocated to new employers and reintegrated into society.

Maldives is a destination country for international migrant workers mostly from Bangladesh, but also from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and the Philippines. The Maldives is also a transit country for international migrants from the Middle East, South and West Asia, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa on their way to Europe. Migrant smuggling has recently emerged as an area of concern in the Maldives. An increase in irregular migration movements has been recorded, as well as a surge in detected fraudulent travel and identity documents, and a range of other fraudulent practices linked to recruitment practices,⁹¹ work contracts and visas for foreign workers. Such practices have also led to trafficking and situations of forced labour of international migrant workers. While the absence of specific legislation on international migrant smuggling makes it difficult to classify cases, an analysis of the indicators observed by different government agencies points to the existence of international migrant smuggling from, into and through the country.

Regulating the migrant labour population remains a major challenge. A skills mismatch in the labour market has amplified the need for migrant workers. Population projections predict a rise in the number of foreign resident population to approximately 52 per cent by 2054⁹².

Maldives has been party to all eight fundamental Conventions of the International Labor Organization since January 2013, and the Employment Act governs all facets of employment. Maldives is not party to the ICRMW. Migrants under its jurisdiction are nevertheless entitled to protection of their human rights in light of Maldives'

⁹¹ Including inflows and outflows (e.g. attempts at irregular entry, movements into irregular status, and possibly facilitated departures of Maldivian citizens for irregular entry in foreign countries).

⁹² Maldives Population Projections 2014-2054, National Bureau of Statistics

ratification of other core instruments. The Fifth Amendment to the Employment Act entails specific provisions empowering MED to impose administrative measures against employers violating requirements to pay salaries, allowances and other emoluments to migrant workers. With the enactment of the Income Tax Act in 2019, the remittance tax requirement has now been repealed.

A revised Employment Agency Regulation was enacted in July 2019. It mandates employment agencies to establish service outlets accessible to the public, obligates recruitment of migrant workers through registered and regulated employment agencies in source countries, and affords authority to MED to blacklist agencies in contravention of the Employment Act and anti-human trafficking laws.

In mid-2019, LRA established an online portal to enable local councils maintain a registry of expatriates. Expatriate Employment Regulation was completely overhauled in August 2020 to address registration of employers for hiring migrant workers, issuing of quota and employment approvals and to introduce mandatory security deposits in favour of the migrant worker. The regulation demarcates the responsibilities of both employers and employees, and outlines a grievance mechanism through which contravening parties may be penalized. Following commencement of the regulation, all local councils have been mandated to maintain an Expatriate Workers Registry to facilitate timely data collection.

A National Task Force on Issues Related to Migrant Workers was subsequently established on 17 September 2019 to formulate policy on all issues relating to migrant workers. A nationwide regularization programme was initiated in early 2019 to provide a pathway for undocumented workers to register within the system and transition to legal work. Over 40,000 undocumented workers were registered during the first phase, being around two thirds of the estimated undocumented workforce (noting that total numbers are still estimates).

During the pandemic, Maldives launched a voluntary repatriation programme for undocumented workers after borders opened. In collaboration with the Bangladesh High Commission, over 7,200 undocumented workers have been voluntarily repatriated.

COVID 19 and the Impact on Human Rights

As witnessed globally, COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the ability of people to fully enjoy their rights, especially those pertaining to civil and political rights. State-enforced lockdowns and curfews strictly restricted the right to freedom of movement, the right to education, the right to equality and non-discrimination, and the right to privacy – which has limited the opportunities and spaces for civic engagement. This has especially affected vulnerable groups such as women, young people, at-risk groups, migrant workers, and detainees.

An estimated 250,000 migrants reside in the Maldives, employed predominantly in construction, hospitality, agriculture, and fisheries sectors. Of these, an estimated 60,000 migrants are irregular, having been trafficked or lost their immigration status and lacking formal employment opportunities. Due to lack of monitoring, oversight, and advocacy, these migrants are vulnerable to human rights violations, including labor exploitation, including debt bondage, document, and wage confiscation, and have been stranded in the Maldives, accommodated in congested, unhygienic guesthouses.

The pre-existing vulnerabilities of the migrant population - health and socio-economic well-being, including the lack of equal access to basic rights to social protection and health services, lack of access to adequate housing - have worsened during the pandemic, particularly due to border closures and lockdown in the greater Malé area. Migrants have been impacted by worsening living conditions, evicted by negligent employers, or moved to temporary Government shelters. Employed in the hardest hit sectors – hospitality, construction – they have faced income reductions, terminations, and furloughs (with migrants representing over 50 percent of the total resort workforce). The conditions have been quite stark for irregular migrants who have been largely excluded from government social assistance relief measures. Migrants comprise 50 percent of the total number of COVID-19 infections in the Maldives, and they have been confined in relocation sites under police

monitoring, without being given a specific timeframe for confinement, nor having recourse to a complaints mechanism or legal counsel, in situations that may amount to arbitrary detention.

These issues have been further compounded due to lack of information, and lack of mechanisms for monitoring or anonymous reporting (especially for irregular migrants), and lack of access to redress mechanisms including legal services.⁹³ Speaking at the 2020 UPR of the Maldives, the Minister of Economic Development said that migrant workers and human trafficking have posed numerous challenges to Maldivian policymakers over the past few decades, and the foreign labour management practices have been in dire need of modernisation and reform, to combat exploitation and to ensure the welfare of the migrant workforce. However the Government is reluctant to access to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

Economic Context

Graduating from Least Developed Country status in 2012, Maldives is now an upper-middle income country. This incredibly rapid shift illustrates the dual nature of the economy: a small island developing state (SIDS) with serious geographic challenges and human capital, and an open economy that is heavily dependent on tourism. Tourism, largely in high-end resorts, accounted for 73.4 per cent of GDP, followed by secondary industries (largely construction and transport) at 10.5 per cent and primary industries (primarily fisheries and agriculture) at 4.9 per cent.⁹⁴ Findings from the Rapid Livelihood Assessment⁹⁵, revealed that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employment was immediate and widespread, with the tourism sector being the first industry to absorb the economic shock from the crisis. Due to a four-month closure of its borders, Maldives saw a drop in tourist arrivals in 2020 (close to 460,000 tourists as of December 2nd), with an expected slow return of up to 1.1 million tourists in 2021 (a drop from 1.5 million in 2019)⁹⁶. As the largest employer in the Maldives, tourism workers have been the hardest hit, with 95 percent of the operations at a complete standstill since the borders closed in March 2020.⁹⁷ A total of 45,000 are employed by the resorts (of which 23,000 are migrant workers) with 85 percent working below managerial levels. From April to June 2020, only 55 percent of resorts retained all payroll employees at reduced salary packages⁹⁸. According to the data collected from Jobcenter, 54 percent of the impacted employees were from the tourism sector, followed by 14 percent in the transportation sector. Most of those terminated are young people age 15-20.

Tourism-led growth in Maldives has (until recently) followed an enclave model, separating tourists from local inhabitants on designated islands. This model is reliant on imported goods, labour and finance, which limits the backward linkages that could otherwise spur indirect job and growth effects.⁹⁹ There is now government commitment to the expansion of middle-range tourist guest houses on locally inhabited islands, targeting middle income tourists, but there are still unrealized opportunities for linking tourism to local communities (including but not limited to local provision of fish and agriculture products).

The guesthouse sector has grown rapidly since 2010. In 2018, guesthouses totaled nearly 459 facilities with around 8,000 beds¹⁰⁰. The sector is projected to double in the next three years as global travel trends shift toward mid-level travel options with self-catering accommodations instead of traditional hotels.

Opportunities for service-provision linkages are more limited. This is in part because many resorts already own and operate their support services and ancillary functions, due to geo-spatial challenges and inadequate

⁹³ [Rapid Livelihood Assessment: Impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the Maldives.](#)

⁹⁴ National Bureau of Statistics (2018): Statistical Yearbook of Maldives 2018, Table 16.3: Share of GDP by Activity, 2003-2017

⁹⁵ [Rapid Livelihood Assessment: Impact of covid-19 crisis in the Maldives, 2020](#)

⁹⁶ [Management of Public Finance Impact of COVID-19](#), Ministry of Finance, Press Release March 2020.

⁹⁷ Rapid Livelihood Assessment – Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis in the Maldives, Part II: Impact on Employment, Ministry of Economic Development and UNDP Maldives, July 2020.

⁹⁸ Ibid, Resort Management Survey.

⁹⁹ Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Environmental & social management framework

¹⁰⁰ Maldives independent. Sep2, 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/business/guesthouses-to-control-half-of-maldives-tourist-bed-capacity-by-2028-140762>

quality of local service provision. There are a limited number of Maldivians with qualifications and experience to perform higher skilled jobs in the resorts. The percentage of female employees is significantly lower at only 10 per cent of which just 3 per cent of local female employees in 2019. This is largely due to societal perceptions and norms that household responsibilities and caring are the role of women. This further restricts women's mobility and the opportunities to work outside of their homes, especially outside their island¹⁰¹.

In addition to the tourism industry, fishing, agriculture and shipping are the key economic mainstays, despite their shrinking size in the economy in recent years. Construction is growing enormously. Fishing sustainability is increasingly threatened by overfishing, high fuel costs and rising ocean temperatures. Its share of GDP decreased from 6 per cent in 2007 to 3.7 per cent in 2017, driven to some extent by lower engagement of Maldivian youth in the sector, and growth of other industries. The value of fish exports declined by 46 percent in May 2020, mainly due to the fluctuations in international fish prices.¹⁰²

The share of agriculture declined from 1.8 to 1.2% of GDP during the same period. The small contribution of agriculture is due to the scarcity of arable land and fresh water, the limited size of the domestic market and high transport costs for agricultural products. Maldives imports 90 per cent of its food, except for fresh tuna (a main trade commodity) and coconuts. Staple food imports come from single source countries, which poses a substantial risk to food security in the Maldives from natural disasters or external shocks such as COVID-19, or economic and political situations in the source country. In 2018, Maldives imported 95 per cent of its rice from India and 80 per cent of its flour from Turkey.¹⁰³ With fishing providing almost 10 per cent of food requirements, the fishing sector's vulnerability is a worrisome sign for the country's food security.

Maldives has reached an Average Dietary Energy Supply Adequacy ratio of above 120, which is higher than the average in Asia at 117. However, it is estimated that 20 per cent of Maldivians suffer from food insecurity. The Maldives is extremely vulnerable to changes or shocks in global food supply and prices. Food trade, storage and distribution play a critical role in the access and availability dimensions of food security. With water being 99 per cent of Maldives territory, and with distantly located small island populations scattered across the country, marine transport is the most important mode for the transport of all goods including food items. The quantity of food items transported to outlying islands in a single trip by a cargo boat is limited and delivery is often unreliable. It is common for remote communities to experience periodic food shortages, especially of nutritious fresh products such as milk, eggs, vegetables and fruit. Food storage facilities in the north (main warehouse in Kulhudhuffushi) and south (main warehouse in Hithadhoo) are insufficient to maintain food reserves. Given the dependence on imports, unreliable distribution patterns, and inadequate decentralised storage facilities, the rural population in the Maldives face serious risks of periodic food insecurity.

As the third sector of the Maldives economy, agriculture lags behind. The country's fragile ecology and climate change vulnerability, combined with limited cultivable land, limits the sector's expansion. Logistics and market access are also significant challenges. Farming is mostly practiced on a limited scale. Small farmers in the outer atolls suffer the most from periodic food insecurity. There is limited public and private investment in the sector, and as a result, the country relies heavily on imported agricultural products.

Potential impacts include salt-water intrusion and erosion due to gradual rise in the sea level, change in rainfall patterns and increase in frequency of extreme climatic events. Salt-water intrusion due to gradual rise in the sea level is devastating for agriculture. The global mean sea level rose 10-20 cm during the 20th century at the rate of 1 to 2 mm/year. Investment in the agriculture sector must necessarily be climate smart.

The future of agriculture in Maldives largely depends on demand in the tourism sector. However, concerns about the volume, supply and quality of locally produced food have reduced resorts' incentives to buy local

¹⁰¹ <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Resort-Employee-Survey-2019-1.pdf>, National Bureau of Statistics, 2020

¹⁰² Monthly Statistics, May 2020, Maldives Monetary Authority.

¹⁰³ Najeeb, F (2019). Food security: Are we stable in staples. Maldives Economic Review

agricultural products. This is an opportunity to invest in training and standards setting in the agricultural sector, which has the potential to create jobs as well as generate income and address food security, as well as the needs of the hospitality industry.

As of 2018, resorts were buying the majority of the Maldivian grown products, bananas, papayas and watermelons, and cultivating themselves or importing all other goods.¹⁰⁴ Public perception firmly rates imported food as of better quality. Consumerism, uncontrolled imports of food, and challenges in marketing and selling local produce make the growth of agriculture in the country difficult. However, fisheries and agriculture still play a crucial role in food security and generating employment.

Industrial development in the energy and other sectors is limited by Maldives' lack of mineral and oil reserves. According to the Ministry of Energy, ongoing renewable energy projects were planned to provide 13 kilowatts of renewable energy (solar photovoltaic) by the end of 2018. Renewables should have a significant impact on imported fuel costs in the medium term, increasing the feasibility of local manufacturing.

The absence of an active small and medium enterprise (SME) ecosystem is noteworthy. Limited entrepreneurial skills among youth, high costs of land, labor and raw materials makes it difficult for self-starters and limited seed funding/startup capital constrains entrepreneurial activities. The government has proactively fostered entrepreneurship for the past five years. Three ongoing loan schemes provide access to seed finance for new and existing businesses: the SME loan scheme; the Get-Set program; and the Women Enterprise Fund (WEF).¹⁰⁵ Early results indicate poor quality of business plans, low success rate of the businesses that have received support, inadequate business support services and skills support, and low repayment rates. Impacts on MSME operations during COVID-19 revealed disruption to businesses, supply disruptions, impacts on cost of operations, loss of sales and revenue, impact on cashflow, and employment adjustments made by MSMEs. Interviews with MSMEs indicated that a small proportion of businesses said that they can manage cashflow up to six months. Among the challenges to doing business included barriers to access finance, limited access to business support services, unmet skills requirements in areas of business management, slow technology uptake, limited scale of transition to green/environmentally friendly technology, and weak enforcement of laws.

The construction sector has been growing over the last two decades, increasing its share of GDP at an average annual growth rate of 14.6 from 2014-2019. In 2019, the sector contributed MVR 4.8 billion (US\$308m) to GDP (6.4 per cent. In 2018 and 2019, the sector contributed more than two and a half times more to the GDP than manufacturing, and added more to the GDP than manufacturing and electricity and water industries combined. However the construction sector has noted slow growth of 3.7 per cent in 2019 when compared to other secondary sectors in 2019 (e.g. manufacturing was at 9.1 per cent).

The sector, upon close assessment, boasts several special characteristics. It is heavily dependent on foreign labour, employing 13 foreigners for every 1 Maldivian, and excessively reliant on imports. Preliminary estimates for 2019 show that sector imports totaled US\$ 406 million, second only to tourism imports (USD 450 million) on free on board (FOB) basis. Moreover, mega-infrastructure and construction projects are generally financed by overseas lenders and this is illuminated by the fact that, in 2020, the national budget envisaged an uptick in capital spending by 75 per cent, to a record-high 14 per cent of the GDP financed externally¹⁰⁶. The sector is also dependent on international organizations to implement projects.

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected tourism due to prevention measures that have been enforced both nationally and internationally to arrest the spread of the virus. As a result, delivery of projects have slowed, overseas recruitment to the workforce has been paused, and impacts on logistics and procurement

¹⁰⁴ Plewa P (2019). Migration in Maldives: A country Profile, International Organisation for Migration

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Environmental & social management framework

¹⁰⁶ IMF, Regional economic outlook, 2020.

processes have been experienced. This in turn has had a compound effect on revenue and cash flow and has the potential to increase costs due to a depreciating national currency. The Government has introduced multiple support measures to stabilize the sector, foremost of which have been recommencing Public Sector Infrastructure Projects (PSIP), providing concessions for importers of construction supplies, and issuing permits for some construction to resume at halted work sites by introducing new health and safety guidelines for construction sites. All construction companies were permitted to resume operations from July 2020.

The Government has repurposed the Strategic Action Plan in light of the impact of COVID-19. The Government will continue its strategic infrastructure development programme, which includes expansion and upgrading of three international airports; Velana International Airport in Greater Male' Region, Addu International Airport (South) and Hanimaadhoo International Airport (North). The central maritime port will be relocated from Male' to Gulhifalhu, and the Greater Male' Connectivity project aimed at improving greater connectivity between islands near Male' will be implemented. These strategic projects have been marked for completion by 2023 noting their importance for economic diversification and growth.

Employment

The current labour force participation rate (LFPR) in the Maldives stands at 60.2%, LFPR for women aged 15-64, is 45.6 per cent compared to 77.1 percent of Maldivian men as per 2016 HIES. The service sector accounted for 70 per cent of total employment followed by industry (18 per cent), public administration (15 per cent), trade (13 per cent) and agriculture (9 per cent).¹⁰⁷ In 2019 the overall unemployment rate was 5.3 per cent, higher among men (5.6 per cent) than among women (4.8 per cent). The youth unemployment rate (18-34 years) at 8 per cent was higher than the national average. Women's LFPR declined in comparison to 2010¹⁰⁸..

Indicator	Republic			Male'			Atolls		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Population (15+ years) ¹	169,729	147,753	317,482	80,151	74,439	154,590	89,578	73,314	162,892
Labour force	77,421	113,849	191,270	38,935	60,776	99,711	38,486	53,072	91,559
Employment	73,717	107,426	181,144	36,889	56,729	93,618	36,829	50,697	87,526
Labour underutilized	17,905	11,494	29,398	8,694	5,971	14,666	9,210	5,523	14,733
-Time related underemployment	360	103	464	99	-	99	261	103	364
-Unemployment	3,704	6,422	10,127	2,046	4,047	6,094	1,658	2,375	4,033
-Potential labour force	13,840	4,968	18,808	6,549	1,924	8,473	7,291	3,044	10,335
Labour force participation rate	45.6%	77.1%	60.2%	48.6%	81.6%	64.5%	43.0%	72.4%	56.2%
Employment-to-population ratio	43.4%	72.7%	57.1%	46.0%	76.2%	60.6%	41.1%	69.2%	53.7%
LU4: Labour underutilization	19.6%	9.7%	14.0%	19.1%	9.5%	13.6%	20.1%	9.8%	14.5%
Education level of employed population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
-Primary education and below	26%	32%	30%	14%	17%	16%	38%	49%	44%
-Secondary & higher secondary education	56%	55%	55%	59%	63%	61%	53%	45%	49%
-Tertiary education	18%	13%	15%	26%	20%	23%	9%	5%	7%
Top 5 occupation at National level									
- Cleaners and Helpers in offices, Hotels and Other Establishment	4,899	3,077	7,976	1,931	479	2,410	2,968	2,598	5,566
- Deep-sea Fishery Workers	7	6,811	6,818	-	428	428	7	6,382	6,390
- Cashiers and ticket clerks	5,070	2,657	7,726	3,290	1,500	4,790	1,780	1,156	2,936
- General office clerks	3,695	2,521	6,216	2,397	1,659	4,056	1,298	862	2,160
- Administrative and executive secretaries	3,306	1,842	5,148	2,592	1,053	3,646	714	789	1,503
Branch of economic activity ³									
-Agriculture	2%	11%	7%	0%	1%	1%	3%	23%	14%
-Industry	20%	16%	18%	10%	12%	11%	30%	22%	25%
-Manufacturing	18%	5%	10%	8%	2%	4%	28%	8%	17%
-Service	78%	72%	74%	89%	87%	88%	66%	56%	60%
-Public administration	14%	18%	16%	18%	22%	21%	9%	13%	11%
-Trade	11%	11%	11%	13%	15%	15%	9%	7%	8%
Status in employment									
-Employees	73%	78%	76%	85%	84%	84%	61%	71%	66%
-Employers	1%	5%	3%	1%	5%	4%	1%	4%	3%
-Own account workers	23%	12%	16%	13%	9%	11%	33%	15%	22%
-Contributing family workers	2%	2%	2%	0%	1%	1%	4%	2%	3%
-Group workers	1%	4%	3%	0%	1%	1%	2%	8%	5%
Informal sector	25%	16%	19%	13%	7%	9%	37%	26%	31%
Informal Employment	44%	36%	39%	34%	25%	28%	54%	49%	51%

¹⁰⁷ National Bureau of Statistics (2019). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)

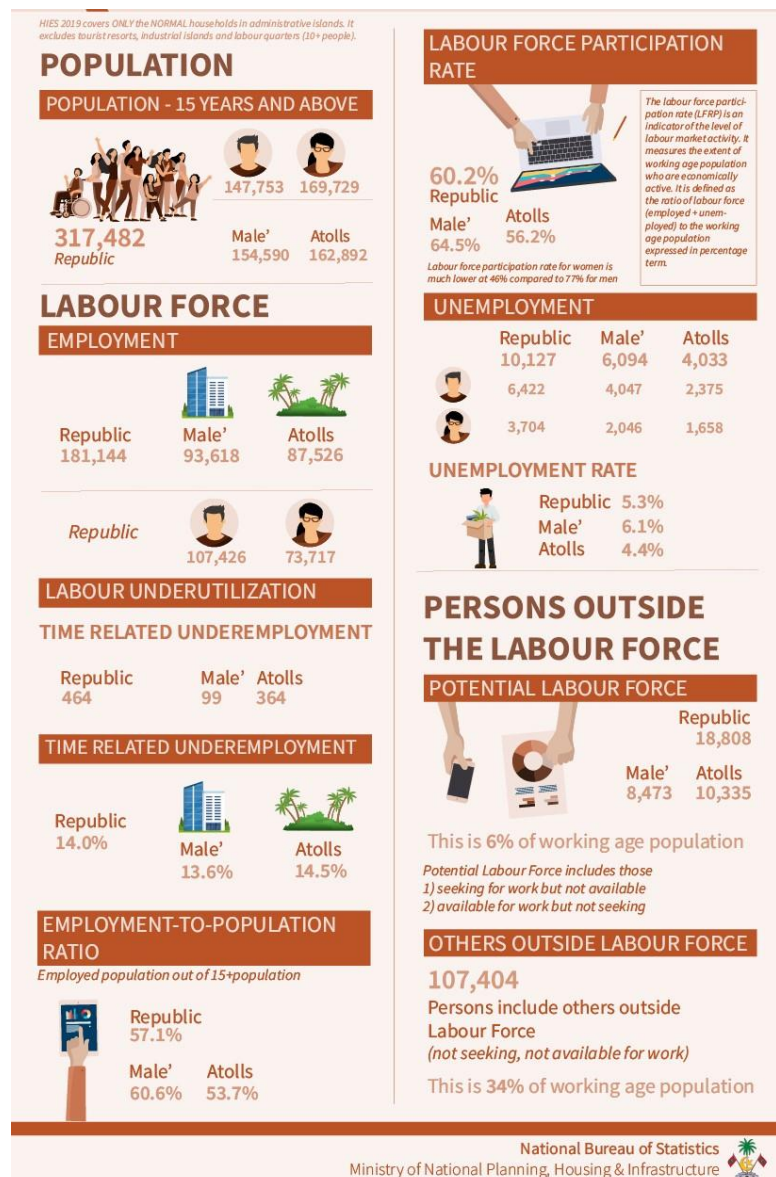
¹⁰⁸ Maldives NGO Shadow Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women 2012, Hope for Women pg. 54

Nationally, the gender pay gap for the resident population is 20 per cent. If only Maldivians are considered (excluding foreign migrant population), the gender pay gap at national level is 26 per cent. This means that on average Maldivian women earn MVR 22.51 per hour less than men. Women's overall monthly earnings are MVR 7,510 (approximately USD\$487) as compared to MVR 11,977 (approximately USD\$776) for men.¹⁰⁹

Maldivians typically occupy lower-paying jobs in the tourism sector which is dominated by foreign workers, and women continue to be side-lined from the biggest employment sector other than the government.¹¹⁰ It is evident that there are data gaps to give a clear picture of women representation in tourism sector as these data are not captured in HIES. However, local female participation in the tourism sector is 2 per cent and local male participation is 47 per cent. The expatriate labour force in the sector is significant at 5 per cent for foreign females and 46 per cent for foreign males.¹¹¹

Anecdotal evidence suggests that these figures may have increased slightly, with more female staff joining tourism sector, with a few resorts running programs to attract females to join. The main reason women do not seek resort employment is the negative perceptions of resort life that conflict with Islamic values, and both parents and young women perceive resorts as being unsafe.¹¹² With growing guest house tourism in inhabited islands in the last decade, it is unclear how many women benefit from this new sector. This is a potential employment sector where women residing in the islands could tap into with adequate policies and interventions.

Historically, fishing and agriculture were the main sources of traditional livelihoods of rural women outside the public sector. However, this has faded away overtime due to modernization of these sectors. The Government has pledged special loan schemes to develop agricultural sector businesses and states that a specific portion of the loan scheme will be allocated to women. Similarly, the government stated that measures will be introduced to increase women role in the fishing industry¹¹³.



¹⁰⁹ Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure, Maldives page 21

¹¹⁰ Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure, Maldives page 31.

¹¹¹ Maldives NGO Shadow Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women 2012, Hope for Women pg. 53

¹¹² Gender Analysis of Mangrove for Future Program in Seenu Hithadhoo 2017, UNDP Mangrove For Future Program, pg. 14

¹¹³ Core Principles, Characteristics and Policies of the "Unity Government" by Political Parties' Coalition 2018, unofficial translation, UNDP Maldives

Employed population and percentage shares, by occupational groups and sex, 2019

Occupational groups (ISCO)	Republic			Male ¹			Atolls		
	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female
1. Managers	16,840	13,612	3,227	12,612	10,026	2,586	4,228	3,586	642
2. Professionals	27,990	9,792	18,198	15,571	6,357	9,214	12,420	3,435	8,985
3. Technicians and associate professionals	32,601	23,373	9,228	21,438	15,060	6,378	11,163	8,313	2,850
4. Clerical support workers	15,502	7,035	8,467	10,386	4,923	5,464	5,116	2,113	3,003
5. Service and sales workers	25,410	14,852	10,558	13,766	7,584	6,182	11,644	7,269	4,376
6. Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	11,919	10,783	1,136	621	621		11,298	10,162	1,136
7. Craft and related trades workers	22,389	9,110	13,279	5,736	2,803	2,932	16,653	6,307	10,346
8. Plant and machine operators and assemblers	6,995	6,703	293	3,712	3,670	42	3,283	3,033	251
9. Elementary occupations	18,343	9,095	9,248	7,044	3,005	4,040	11,298	6,090	5,208
0. Armed forces occupations	2,767	2,700	67	2,550	2,499	51	217	201,121	15
99. Unable to codify	389	372	17	183	183		206	189	17
Total all groups	181,144	107,426	73,717	93,618	56,729	36,889	87,526	50,697	36,829

Due to the reproductive and care work roles assigned to women, a significant number of employed women are engaged in the informal sector. Women in the informal sector consist of 40 per cent¹¹⁴ and they are excluded from the social protection system (such as participation in the national pension scheme). A potential MSME sector is emerging with the new technological advances and introduction of social media platforms, women are increasingly capitalizing on these platforms to do home-based businesses such as craft making, retail and other types of home businesses. As per the stakeholder consultations, some of these retail home-based businesses are taking off customer bases from established retail setups due to reduced overhead costs. These need to be taken into the national accounts, and a system created to assess the impact of small businesses towards women financial independence and to the economy. This research needs to be conducted before any policy interventions are carried out to bring any transformative development.

Employed population and percentage shares by industry and sex, 2019

Industry / Activity (ISIC)	Percentage shares (%)											
	Republic				Male ¹				Atolls			
	Both sexes	Males	Females	Female Shares (%)	Both sexes	Males	Females	Female Shares (%)	Both sexes	Males	Females	Female Shares (%)
A Agriculture, forestry and fishing	7.4	11.3	1.7	9.4	0.9	1.4	0.2	8.6	14.4	22.5	3.2	9.4
B Mining and quarrying	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.5	0.0	0.0
C Manufacturing	10.4	5.0	18.2	71.3	4.4	2.1	8.0	71.1	16.8	8.3	28.5	71.3
D Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	2.7	3.6	1.3	19.6	1.3	1.4	1.1	33.7	4.2	6.1	1.5	15.1
E Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	1.4	2.0	0.5	14.2	2.0	2.8	0.7	14.7	0.7	1.1	0.2	12.8
F Construction	3.4	5.4	0.3	3.9	3.3	5.0	0.6	6.8	3.5	5.9	0.1	0.9
G Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motor	11.3	11.4	11.2	40.2	14.5	15.2	13.4	36.3	8.0	7.2	9.0	47.8
H Transportation and storage	9.5	13.8	3.2	13.7	13.3	18.8	4.9	14.4	5.4	8.2	1.5	11.7
I Accommodation and food service activities	6.7	8.3	4.4	26.6	5.9	6.9	4.4	29.3	7.5	9.8	4.4	24.4
J Information and communication	1.8	2.3	1.0	22.4	3.0	3.9	1.5	20.3	0.5	0.5	0.4	36.8
K Financial and insurance activities	1.4	1.5	1.2	36.8	2.3	2.3	2.3	39.2	0.4	0.6	0.2	22.8
L Real estate activities	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
M Professional, scientific and technical activities	2.4	2.8	1.9	32.1	4.5	5.0	3.7	32.7	0.2	0.3	0.1	18.7
N Administrative and support service activities	1.6	1.5	1.7	42.8	2.3	2.6	1.9	32.2	0.9	0.4	1.5	72.3
O Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	16.1	17.8	13.7	34.5	20.6	22.4	18.0	34.4	11.3	12.8	9.4	34.8
P Education	12.5	5.4	22.9	74.6	10.4	3.9	20.3	77.4	14.8	7.0	25.6	72.5
Q Human health and social work activities	6.2	3.2	10.6	69.4	5.3	2.2	10.1	75.4	7.2	4.4	11.1	64.7
R Arts, entertainment and recreation	1.2	1.4	0.7	26.2	1.8	2.0	1.4	30.4	0.5	0.8	0.1	10.1
S Other service activities	1.4	1.8	0.9	26.1	0.8	1.0	0.5	23.9	2.2	2.7	1.4	26.9
T Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use	2.1	0.6	4.3	82.7	3.0	0.5	6.8	90.1	1.2	0.8	1.8	62.8
U Activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies	0.0	0.0	0.1	86.3	0.1	0.0	0.1	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Unable to codify	0.3	0.4	0.2	21.7	0.4	0.6	0.2	20.5	0.1	0.1	0.1	26.6
Total all groups	100.0	100.0	100.0	40.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	39.4	100.0	100.0	100.0	42.1

The main reason why women do not engage in productive work is because unpaid care work at home limits women's full and robust labor force participation. The HIES 2019 indicates that the proportion of time spent on domestic and unpaid care work is significantly higher for women at 15 per cent compared to just 5 per cent for men. It is equally important to recognize the care economy contribution to national accounts which is a major contribution is from women. The National Transfer Accounts (NTA) projects that unpaid work

¹¹⁴ Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, Employment Leaflet, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Treasury, Government of Maldives

contributes MVR 8.6 - 17.8 billion (US\$549m-1.136b) to the economy which when added to the GDP at market costs would be at 14.9 per cent and at opportunity cost increase to 27.3 per cent. Women with care responsibilities are more likely to be self-employed, to work in the informal economy, and less likely to contribute to social security.

New graduates and young people completing grade 12 typically seek administrative jobs, but these are in short supply, particularly in the private sector where employment opportunities are concentrated in the tourism and services-based economy. The large number of government jobs in the civil service and the many state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has created an expectation that “the state will provide”¹¹⁵ – whether through social protection benefits, services, training, or employment. The high reservation wages limit attractive job opportunities for new entrants, who are priced out of the market by international migrant workers at both the low and high ends of the skills spectrum.¹¹⁶ Maldives’ recent development pattern highlight imbalances between labor supply and demand, such as increasing educational attainment among the younger generation and expectations of an “office job” coinciding with rapid growth in low-skilled service jobs associated with tourism and construction.¹¹⁷

This has resulted in unmet expectations of Maldivian job seekers vis-à-vis available jobs. Recent improvements in household wealth, declining poverty and the introduction of generous social pensions have raised the reservation wage of young labour force entrants. A decade after the enactment of the Employment Act (2/2008), there is a need to effectively operationalize and enforce some of the rights enshrined in the legal framework. An adequate minimum wage system opens the possibility of increasing job opportunities that match the aspirations of nationals, especially young people. However, a minimum wage policy by itself will not be able to increase the participation of national workers in the labour market.

Specific strategies are needed to increase employability and to close the gap between supply and demand for labour. Policy changes required to obtain better labour market outcomes include addressing capacity weaknesses in the education system for teaching technical, vocational and life skills, creating adequate up skilling programmes, proper public employment services, monitoring occupational safety, and cultural mind-set changes among youth towards productive work and self-sustenance. These are essential steps to ensure decent working conditions for all workers in the Maldives. The Government is taking the initiative to roll-out a minimum wage system for the country.

The enclave model of tourism development – one resort, one island – has increased the imbalance between labour supply in the inhabited islands and the demand for skilled and unskilled labour in nearby island resorts. The growth of mostly luxury tourism services has outpaced the capacity of the Maldivian labour market to provide internationally competitive skills required by employers. The persistence of traditional gender roles, particularly the caring role assigned to women, and the narrow scope of occupations deemed acceptable by young women (and especially their parents) have limited the female labour supply, particularly for many job openings in tourism-related services. The ensuing demand for labour has been easily and willingly met by foreign migrant workers. Many of these migrants are undocumented, and therefore often do not have an alternative to accepting significantly lower wages than nationals.

Many Maldivian youth are discouraged workers who have effectively exited the labour force and are best characterized as “NEETs” (Not in Employment, Education or Training). About 22 per cent of working-age Maldivian youth fall into this category.¹¹⁸ The largest number of unemployed and discouraged youth (44 per cent) live in Malé, and the second highest number live in the south of Maldives.¹¹⁹

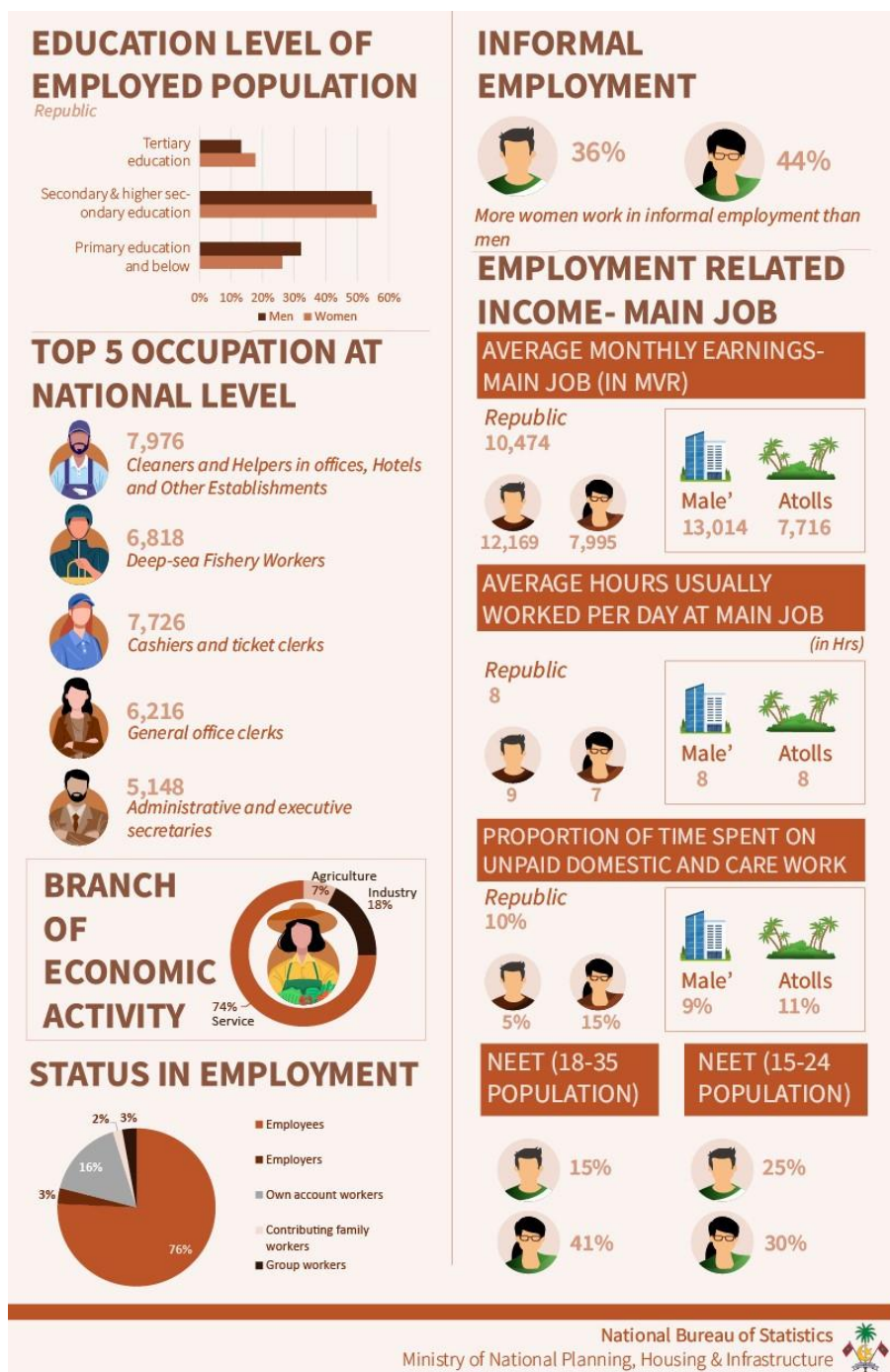
¹¹⁵ Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Environmental & social management framework

¹¹⁶ *ibid*

¹¹⁷ *ibid*

¹¹⁸ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Analytical Report III: Employment. p7.

¹¹⁹ *ibid*



Unlike other culturally similar countries in South Asia, Maldivian women have a relatively high labour force participation rate, at 42 per cent (on par with other countries at the same level of development).

The NEET rate is very similar for the two age groups (15-24 and 18-35 population), but is much higher for women, at 30% and 41% respectively. For men, the NEET rate decreases with age to 15% at age 18-35 years as compared to 25% at 15-24 year olds.¹²⁰ A high NEET rate among women as compared to men is often an indication that they are engaged in household duties or the care economy, which reflects traditional gender roles. Despite the low number of women reporting employment complaints in the JobCenter, redundancy and complete loss of income was higher for women than men. 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.

school and unemployed vary by gender. Male youth indicate that the biggest reasons for unemployment are the lack of economic opportunities in their island of residence and inability to find suitable employment which matches their education or training. Fifty per cent of young females give household chores and childcare as reasons for economic inactivity.

There is growing concern over discouraged youth, due to their rising NEET rate, as it can be an indication of risk of exclusion, discrimination, victimisation by domestic and gender-based violence and being drawn to undesirable activities (gangs, drugs and extremism).

¹²⁰ National Bureau of Statistics (2019). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)

The main challenges of unemployment in Maldives are not a lack of jobs, but the limited linkages with employment opportunities that results from skills mismatch of youth exiting the school system and preferences toward white collar jobs that limit job uptake by young Maldivians.¹²¹

The tourism and construction sectors are the largest employers besides public administration jobs, but these sectors also register the greatest numbers of foreign labour participation. From the demand side, employers indicate that there are significant challenges with hiring Maldivian youth. The absence of a proper work ethic, the absence of a minimum wage, inadequate social, interpersonal, customer service and communication skills, and inadequate technical/vocational skills are cited as some of the key challenges to recruiting nationals.

Current laws, including the Employment Act of 2008, do not protect the formation of trade unions or safeguard workers from unfair labor practices. Several cases of worker mistreatment and unfair labour practices have been reported, with workers being arrested, dismissed, or transferred for complaining or attempting to organize. International migrant workers, especially those employed in the tourism and construction sectors, are particularly vulnerable to labour abuses. Labour authorities lack the resources and training to prevent, investigate, or penalize violations of workers' rights. There are no general regulations for occupational safety and health preventing labor inspectors from identifying and correcting hazardous working conditions.

The whole range of economic policies – for both immediate response and long-term recovery – need to be designed and implemented with a gender lens. This includes removal of barriers that prevent full involvement of women in economic activities, equal pay and equal opportunities, social protection schemes that factor in existing biases, financing for women entrepreneurs and mechanisms to promote women's self-employment. Such economic responses would include both the public and private spheres. Equally, narrowing gender-based education gaps and ensuring women remain in and expand their participation in the formal labour market will play a significant role in providing many economies with the capacity to 'rebound' with stronger, more equitable and sustainable growth. Current social protection systems are not wide enough. Many women will not have access as safety nets frequently depend on formal participation in the labor force. For example, single parent allowance (translated in Dhivehi as "single mother allowance") is not eligible when the mother gets married or even if the woman is employed in a low paying job. Access to benefits such as health insurance, paid sick and maternity leave, pensions and unemployment benefits need to reach beyond formal employment and be accessible to women in all spheres of work.

Fiscal performance

During the last few years, fiscal expenditure continued to grow at a faster pace than revenue. The Government borrowed heavily for infrastructure development, largely from China. A large construction-driven deficit, reaching 9.1 per cent of GDP in 2016, induced a rise in public debt as a percentage of GDP from 52.7 per cent in 2010 to 73 per cent in 2018, and was projected to expand further to 80 per cent¹²² of GDP by the end of 2019. Real GDP declined significantly by 51.6 per cent in Q2-2020, when compared with the same quarter a year ago. This was a deeper plunge when compared with the revised growth rate of -5.0 per cent for Q1-2020 (previously at -5.9 per cent). Real GDP growth is now projected to decline significantly in 2020 due to the severe impact of COVID-19 on tourist arrivals amid strict measures taken by governments across the world to contain the virus' spread. During January to August 2020, total revenue recorded a 39 per cent decline, while total expenditure increased by 3 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. The fiscal balance is also forecasted to reach -22 per cent of GDP in 2020 with only a modest improvement by 2022 at 16.6 per cent. Total government debt amounted to MVR57.3 billion at the end of Q2-2020, a 3 per cent increase from Q1-2020. Similarly, total government debt as a percentage of GDP increased to 84 per cent at the end of Q2-2020. Debt to GDP is expected to reach 120 per cent for 2020 with an expected trajectory of reaching 129 per cent

¹²¹ Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Environmental & social management framework

¹²² Ministry of Finance and Treasury (2019). Medium Term Debt Management Strategy 2020-2022

by the end of 2022. One of the biggest challenges facing Maldives is constraints due to the increase in foreign currency debt, and that the state needs to reduce its expenditure, reduce its fiscal deficit, and manage debt at a sustainable level. Maldives is set to pay MVR 10 billion as debt repayment in Q4 of this year. The largest contribution to debt in 2019 will be publicly guaranteed debt, as projects being implemented with guaranteed loans are near completion, and loans are expected to be fully utilized in the short term.

The real exchange rate and the current account are projected to converge towards fundamentals with the winding down of large infrastructure projects, and since the Maldives maintains a defector peg¹²³, that there is little room for monetary policy¹²⁴. The IMF notes the high contingent liability exerted by the State-Owned Enterprises' (SOEs) public guaranteed external borrowing and the need to limit such guarantees and reduce inefficiencies in SOEs¹²⁵.

The current Government has reversed reliance on borrowing from China. This has been offset by new commitments from India, which has pledged \$1.4 billion to Maldives. Grants from India at the end of June 2019 include \$25 million, with an investment of MVR 1,542 million in government securities, and a further investment of MVR 771 million in government securities in 2020. Total revenue and grants received at the end of June 2019 were 5.3 per cent more compared to the same period of 2018. The main reason for this is the growth experienced by the tourism sector in 2019.¹²⁶ Import duties, business profit tax and general GST also increased due to the growth of the economy and the subsequent increase in imports.

Social Context

Education

The Maldives allocates a significant portion of the national budget to education – MVR 4 billion (US\$255m) in 2021 (MVR 3.3 billion (US\$210m) in 2019 - 11.0 per cent, which accounts for 3.6 per cent of GDP.¹²⁷ Public education unit costs show a growth of over 6 per cent annually over the past 10 years while households spend about 0.5 per cent of GDP on education. The Maldives achieved MDG 2 on universal primary education in 2010.¹²⁸ Public school education is free and is a Constitutional provision until middle-school, with all children are provided access to free education until the completion of lower secondary level. Ministry of Education data shows that student enrolment figures have been maintained over the past 5 years. Sustained at near parity, girls' enrolment in higher secondary education surpassed boys by 11 per cent in 2018, which is a slight improvement towards balancing the same disparity from 2014, to achieve parity for boys. Special Education Needs (SEN) are especially weak, which is evident in data showing the existing gender gap in school enrolment of girls with SEN. Compared to 2014, the data shows a significantly widening gap in girls' enrolment in SEN by 2018. This evidence shows the increased vulnerabilities of the girl child and compounding factors.

There is a significant gender imbalance among teachers in the school system in the country, given the traditional bias for women to enter the teaching profession. Data for 2014 and 2018 shows a persistent gender gap among the permanent teaching staff, whether they are trained or untrained. In 2014, among local graduate teachers 77 per cent were women and 23 per cent men, while this disparity had increased by 2018 in this group, with 80 per cent women and 20 per cent men.¹²⁹ The school system is served by a significant number of expatriate teachers, with a higher proportion of men to women.

¹²³ Although the Maldivian rufiyaa is not officially pegged to the dollar, the Monetary Authority of Maldives determines a reference rate that the exchange rate between the rufiyaa and the dollar can fluctuate around.

¹²⁴ World bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/30938156229205521/text/Maldives-First-Fiscal-Sustainability-and-Budget-Credibility-Development-Policy-Financing-Operation.txt>

¹²⁵ IMF country report 19/156. Maldives 2019 article iv consultation—press release; staff report; and statement by the executive director for Maldives

¹²⁶ Ministry of finance and treasury (2019). Medium Term Fiscal Strategy 2020-2022

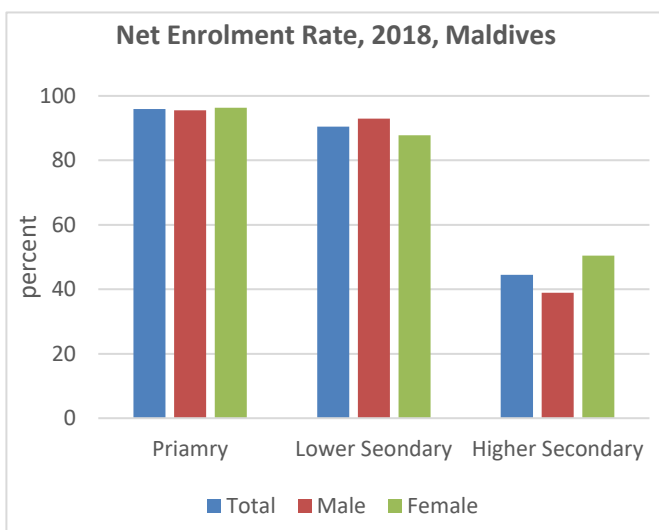
¹²⁷ Ministry of Education (2019). Education Sector Analysis. p.56

¹²⁸ MDGs : *Maldives Country Report 2010*, Department of National Planning, Ministry of Finance and Treasury, Government of Maldives

¹²⁹ School Statistics 2014 ; School Statistics 2018, Ministry of Education, Government of Maldives

Data published by the MNU shows a significant and persistent gender gap in graduate numbers with a clear downward trend for women graduates, which is inconsistent with the previously cited enrolment figures. Consulted stakeholders cite a series of challenges to women students to continue their studies, with the triple burden of paid work, unpaid care-work and study being unfeasibly challenging to many students. In February 2019, the Government introduced a scheme making undergraduate education at public and private institutions tuition-free, which may improve opportunities for women to remain in higher education to complete their studies.¹³⁰

Overall, social attitudes and gender stereotyping affect the higher education and employment prospects for women who are disproportionately represented in the insecure informal sector, in lower paid jobs, in both public and private sectors, regardless of educational achievements. Persisting societal norms inhibit women’s access to key industries like tourism, which is perceived as a sector unfit for a woman.¹³¹ Consulted stakeholders state that girls participation and uptake in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects is problematic, which should be addressed. Stakeholders consider facilitating graduate women entry to the job market by providing child-care facilities to sustain formal and stable employment as a key priority. Furthermore, professional women who have managed to continue contributing economically must be retained in productive work, to ensure they may move up the ranks to decision-making positions without interruptions to their career due to reproductive responsibilities. Stakeholders observe the loss in women’s productive work to the country when educated graduates are unable to enter the formal employment market and contribute, due to the lack of an enabling environment to do so for women.¹³²



In 2018, the net enrolment ratio (NER) for both girls and boys at pre-primary level were over 92 per cent. For Primary level, NER was above 95 per cent. The NER starts to fall at lower secondary level to 90.5 per cent and steeply drops at higher secondary to 44.5 per cent (50.4 per cent for girls and 38.9 per cent for boys).¹³³ This is largely due to non-availability of higher education opportunities in the Atolls, which forces a number of adolescents to migrate to Malé. Science stream is offered mainly in larger islands and Arts stream is almost non-existent. In addition, 19 girls dropped out of school in 2018-2019 for becoming pregnant¹³⁴. While the NER is high in primary and lower secondary, the quality of

education is not on par. The education sector analysis notes that the proportion of 4th and 7th grade students who have attained mastery level competence in language (Dhivehi and English) and Mathematics is low compared to many other countries. As per the national assessment of learning outcomes (NALO) 2015 and 2016, approximately 37.8 per cent of the students in Grade 4 and 43.24 per cent of students in Grade 7 failed to achieve the minimum pass percentage of 40 per cent. Girls perform better in achieving the desired outcomes than boys at both Grades 4 and 7 in Mathematics, English and Dhivehi language. There is a clear geographical difference in the results.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ *First degrees in Maldives made tuition-free*, Maldives Independent, 14 February 2019, <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/first-degrees-in-maldives-made-tuition-free-14376>

¹³¹ *Qualitative Assessment : Perceptions about Women’s Participation in Public Life in the Maldives*, IFES, 2015

¹³² Review of the progress and remaining challenges in implementing the BPfA. Ibid

¹³³ Ibid.p4

¹³⁴ Communication from Ministry of Education

¹³⁵ Ibid. p6-7

Students scored generally lower in competencies based on higher order thinking. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in the Maldives was revised in 2015. There is not yet an impact evaluation study to examine to what extent the curricula reform contributes to the improvement of learning. The situation calls for a sharper focus on improving the quality of learning at the system level with particular attention to reducing disparities across geographical locations and gender.

The limited skills of teachers significantly impact quality of education. The education sector analysis noted that there is a need for the pre-service teacher training institutions to incorporate training in many aspects of the national curriculum in a more explicit manner, and to improve skills for subject specific teaching. Technical expertise of staff must be improved, including school principals and leading teachers at the school level. Skills of teacher trainers need to be enhanced to ensure effective implementation of the curriculum. In addition, student-teacher ratios, especially in schools at both extremes of enrolment size, need to be further improved.

Inclusive Education Policy and children with SEN have received greater attention with a specialized department with a professional team at the National Institute of Education to support the schools. The inclusive education program of the Maldives is focused on 16 types of students from 3 distinct categories, collectively defined as 'children requiring an Individual Education Plan (IEP)'. In 2018, in the 212 Government schools there were a total of 3,215 students requiring an IEP based on the diagnosis or on suspicion of needing support through an IEP.¹³⁶ Implementation of the SEN Policy however needs to be strengthened, primarily through increased awareness of what special needs involves, and clear leadership on the issue amongst principals and the Ministry of Education. There is a disconnect between the courses offered at Maldives National University (MNU) and the curriculum that is expected to be delivered in the school system. The in-service training on changes to school curriculum is carried out by the NIE/MOE itself.

The integration of pre-primary education into the national education system raises major access, equity and quality issues. No significant progress has been made and quality assurance and regulation for nursery and daycare centres remain unclear.

The Snapshot of the Maldivian School System in 2016-2017 found a large number of schools across the country needed additional buildings/classrooms and that 55 (or 20 per cent) of schools do not meet national minimum standards for educational facilities, including WASH requirements.¹³⁷ It found that 11 of the 55 schools assessed did not have toilets for students, affecting 21 per cent of the students enrolled in these 55 schools; with 10.6 per cent without access to hand washing facilities and 12.3 per cent without access to drinking water.¹³⁸ The lack of toilet facilities disproportionately affects girls, and needs to be addressed urgently.

The student-teacher ratio in Malé is 12:1 while in the outer islands it is 8:1.¹³⁹ Proportionally, the number of expatriate teachers and untrained teachers are higher in the outer islands. The percentage of untrained teachers working in primary schools has dropped to approximately 6 per cent in 2018 from 23 per cent in 2010. With over 500 untrained teachers still working in the system, serious learning gaps are likely, particularly for children in the more isolated islands¹⁴⁰. One of the most significant efforts made to upgrade local teachers is a new requirement of a minimum of a diploma. There is an ongoing partnership between the Maldives National University (MNU) and the Ministry of Education since 2016 to train 3000 in-service teachers to bachelor's degree level. By the completion of this 5-year project, more than 80% of teachers should have a minimum qualification of a bachelor's degree. However, since teacher training and preparation has not been aligned with the new curriculum implementation, there are several gaps in teacher allocations for teaching different subject areas, especially from Key Stage 3 and up. Despite the innovative teaching and learning

¹³⁶ Ministry of Education (2019). Education Sector Analysis.p186-7

¹³⁷ Ministry of Education (2019). Analytical Report of Issues and Challenges from External School Reviews of 2016 & 2017

¹³⁸ Ministry of Education (2019). Assessment Report of the Disadvantaged and Underperforming 55 Schools in the Maldives

¹³⁹ Ministry of Education (2019). Education Sector Analysis.p205

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*

practices promoted in the NCF, some teaching practices continue the promotion of memorization rather than comprehension and higher order cognitive thinking skills. Despite the curriculum including health and physical education, this subject has not been implemented in Key stage 4 and 5, especially when the subjects includes comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) topics and associated life skills for healthy and productive behavior and only 47 per cent of CSE topics covered in Key Stage 1 to 3.

TVET programs for secondary school students at risk were also initiated and while options have grown, the school-to-work transition is still challenging due to (a) lack of soft skills and training in both technical and academic programs ranked high for getting jobs; (b) weak quality and relevance of TVET, which also reduces students’ interest; (c) inadequate linkages between tertiary education institutions and private firms; (d) low quality of teaching in TVET; (e) a lack of competency and outcome based curriculum and assessment; and (f) limited career guidance and counselling to students. Although sector skills councils exist, there is insufficient feedback to the tertiary education institutions and policy makers.

The higher education sector is growing with two public Universities, nine new private colleges and two polytechnics, but there is no proper mechanism or regulation to assist in their governance. There are more than 200 higher education institutions (HEIs) registered and 35 of them offer programmes at diploma and above qualifications.¹⁴¹ Although not officially recognized, the so-called ‘block mode’ teaching is widely used in HEIs. Currently, full-time equivalent programmes are conducted in the ‘block mode’, which is a part-time arrangement, while qualifications are awarded in the full-time duration.

The Ministry of Higher Education and the Maldives Qualification Authority, though mandated for regulation and quality assurance of higher education, do not have qualified staff to properly regulate the sector. The lack of qualified staff has been an issue that has been identified by higher education institutions as well. Though the MNU, the IUM and some private colleges have their own funds for research, there is limited research to guide policy making and no public research grant/facility available in the country.

In 2019, the Government announced a free education policy through completion of undergraduate level in-country, and loans for study abroad. This highly ambitious policy is laudable, but without cost controls and workforce planning systems in place, its cost effectiveness and sustainability are open to question.

Nor is educational policy linked to the skills needed for the implementation of government priorities identified in the SAP. While a number of government institutions suffer from a high turnover of staff and lack of human and technical capacity, there is no clear policy or process to ensure recruitment and retention of trained and skilled staff in the civil service, nor is there a strategy to limit brain drain from the Maldives.

Health

The health of the people of Maldives has improved significantly in the past few decades. Life expectancy at birth has increased from 70 years to 79 years for men and from 70.1 to 85 years for women during the period 2000 to 2015.¹⁴² Child survival has improved significantly with the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) falling from 17 per 1,000 live births in 2001 to 8 per 1,000 live births in 2016. The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) has come down from 143 per 100,000 births in 2001 to 44 per 100,000 births in 2016, owing to better Emergency Obstetric Care (EmOC) at atoll level and antenatal care at the island level.¹⁴³

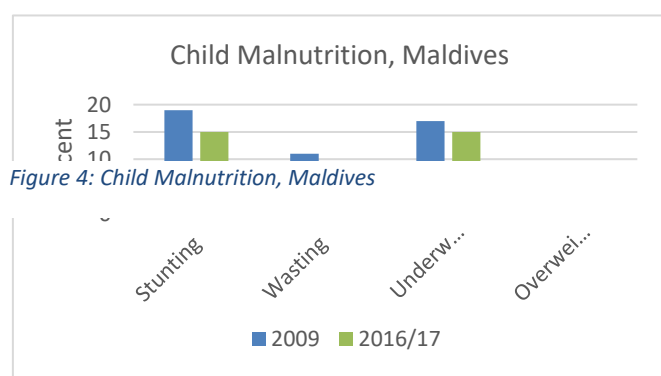


Figure 4: Child Malnutrition, Maldives

¹⁴¹ Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Environmental & social management framework

¹⁴² Ministry of Health (2017). Maldives Health Statistics 2015/16.

¹⁴³ *ibid*

Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has decreased 2.5 in 2009 to 2.1 in 2016-17, despite the drop in contraceptive prevalence rate from 35 to 19 per cent for any method during the same period.¹⁴⁴ The national total fertility rate (TFR) has been declining and stood at 2.5 in 2009 further lowering to 2.1 in 2016-2017, with a trend of higher TFR in rural areas compared to urban Male.

Health services are currently delivered by a four-tier system comprising of island, atoll, regional and central level services. The Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital in Malé serves as the tertiary referral hospital. Six regional and 13 atoll hospitals across the country serve as the first referral while each of the inhabited islands has a fully functional health centre with a medical doctor, nurse and a primary health care worker. Maldives continues to rely heavily on international migrant health professionals, who account for 82 per cent of physicians and 55 per cent of nurses,¹⁴⁵ and it faces the challenges of not only high turnover but assuring the quality of health workforce performance, due to their unfamiliarity with national guidelines and protocols, as well as possible language and cultural barriers. Managing logistics and supplies across the islands' centres and hospitals is challenging, and there is sub-optimal use of information and communication technology.

Although child nutrition status improved over the last decade, progress is slow with small improvements in stunting, wasting and underweight among children under 5 years. Recent research reveals that feeding practices linked to limited responsive feeding skills of parents are a contributing factor¹⁴⁶. The nutritional status of pregnant women and young children's directly affects their physical health and cognitive development and has lifelong impact. Nutritional parameters show both under and over nutrition with high levels of obesity or overweight among women 15-49 years (49 per cent of women, 33 per cent men)¹⁴⁷ that predisposes to NCDs. At the same time, undernutrition is common among the 15-19 years age group, with 38 per cent of women and 35 per cent of men being underweight.¹⁴⁸ Micronutrient deficiencies continue to be a challenge with 50 per cent of children and 63 per cent of women being classified to have anaemia. While part of this situation stems from the high prevalence of Thalassemia among the Maldivian population, unhealthy dietary habits are a major contributor.

Most communicable diseases have been controlled, and Maldives has been certified free of diseases such as malaria, lymphatic filariasis, measles and polio. The Maldives has halted mother-to-child transmission of HIV and is on track to eliminate leprosy.¹⁴⁹ However, there is an increased public health threat from HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), Hepatitis B and TB due to high risk behaviors such as unprotected sex related to drug abuse. Children born out of wedlock to drug using mothers are often taken up for state care. Despite the elimination of measles, in 2020 a case of measles was detected that risks reversing past achievements. With urbanization and climate change effects, vector-borne diseases such as Dengue fever and Chikungunya remain a major cause of morbidity.¹⁵⁰ The dengue outbreak in 2019 was not controlled and remained high at outbreak level throughout the year. Similarly, a significant drop in vaccination coverage was noted in recent DHS findings (from 93 per cent in 2009, to 77 per cent in 2016-2017 as per MDHS). Immunization has been one of the strongest performing and earliest programs of the HPA and the Ministry of Health (MoH) for many years, the decreasing coverage raises major concerns. A system-wide approach to strengthen supply and the demand for vaccine through strategic communication is required to prevent further sliding back. The situation signals the need to place emphasis on the preventive health segment of the government's overall health spending for the health system to maintain past successes, particularly on disease surveillance and appropriate public health response.

¹⁴⁴ Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Ministry of Health, Maldives.p90

¹⁴⁵ Ministry of Health (2017). Maldives Health Statistics 2015/16

¹⁴⁶ Rapid Assessment of Infant Young Child Feeding, Health Protection Agency & UNICEF, 2018

¹⁴⁷ Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Page 162-3

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.p153-4

¹⁴⁹ World Health Organisation (2017). Maldives: A journey of health

¹⁵⁰ Ministry of Health (2016). Health Master Plan 2016-2025.

Insufficient funding and inadequate human resources hamper many of the core capacities required for preparedness for public health emergencies. To a large extent this constrains a One Health approach to implementation of the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005.¹⁵¹ Assessment of the core capacities for IHR indicated the need for improvements in areas such as food safety, workforce development, IHR coordination, zoonosis, points of entry (POE), chemical events, biosecurity and biosafety, amongst others, addressing financing gaps and issues in the retention of experienced and qualified staff.

Maldives has made significant progress in sub-indicators within Early Childhood Development (ECD) such as early learning and vaccination, and overall achieving a high ECD composite index. However, the country does not have sufficient data on key SDG indicators (4.2) such as young children who are developmentally on track in health, learning, and psychosocial well-being, or young children at risk of poor development. ECD is multidimensional, encompassing several aspects of a child's well-being, and requires commitment and coordination across sectors. Maldives does not have an ECD policy, nor a comprehensive programme or interventions delivered as a package. Interventions are delivered separately by respective sectors in silos. Parenting continues to emerge as a common thread in many of the social issues, yet there is no comprehensive parenting programme or a mechanism to reach parents of young children. The health sector is the only sector routinely in contact with children under 3 years and their parents, and the public health platforms are underutilized. The health sector, through growth monitoring and vaccination programs can play an instrumental role to promote early childhood development, positive parenting, and nurturing care.

With population concentration, urbanization and improvements in living standards have come unsafe food products, reliance on traded food commodities, unhealthy lifestyles and environmental changes. Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) have emerged as the main cause of morbidity and mortality in the country. It is estimated that NCDs account for 84 per cent of deaths in the country, men have less survival chance and a 7 year low life expectancy than women¹⁵², and 16 per cent of deaths are classified as premature death for the population aged 30-70 years.¹⁵³ In terms of the number of lives lost due to ill-health, disability, and early death (DALYs), NCDs (inclusive of injuries) account for 78 per cent of the total disease burden.¹⁵⁴ Risk factors for NCDs such as smoking and physical inactivity are high and growing among young people and adults in Maldives. Forty two per cent of men use some form of tobacco and 22 per cent of households are exposed to indoor tobacco smoke.¹⁵⁵ Though Maldives has made combating NCDs one of its top priorities, progress to date is slow due to many challenges, such as limited political will to implement tobacco-control regulations or pricing measures on high sugar and salty food products, limited resources allocated for preventive measures, poor access to NCD diagnostic services and essential medicines, inadequate food and medicine testing capacity and weak NCD surveillance systems and sedentary lifestyles.

Current health challenges include addressing NCDs, a potential risk of drop in immunization coverage, nutritional issues among children as well as adults, cancers and associated unhealthy risk behavior, provision of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and HIV/STIs information and services, particularly in school and for young people, prevention and control of thalassemia and other inherited conditions, addressing increasing mental health burdens and disabilities including developmental disorders and addressing environmental pollution. Critical to this is to recruit, train and place the range of skilled health workers needed to address these challenges and to retain the health workforce in the health system, particularly in the public health services. Condoms for HIV/STI prevention are not provided at health facilities as it is expected that young people buy from pharmacies. Even after several years of strengthening linkages to HIV/AIDS and SRH programme, service provision remains in siloes.

¹⁵¹ World Health Organisation (2017). Joint External Evaluation of IHR Core capacities of the Republic of Maldives.

¹⁵² National Bureau of Statistics, (2020) Statistical Yearbook of Maldives

¹⁵³ World Health Organisation (2020). Non-communicable diseases (NCD) Country Profiles 2018. Maldives.

¹⁵⁴ Ministry of Health (2017). Maldives Health Statistics 2015-16

¹⁵⁵ Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Ministry of Health, Maldives.p11

Attraction and retention of competent local health professionals remains a major constraint due to limited opportunities for career development, lack of retention policies, unattractive employment packages and a rigid organizational structure within the civil service.¹⁵⁶ At the same time, there has been a shift towards facility-based curative care rather than community based primary health care. Frequent and ad hoc changes to the organization of health systems with changes in government and policies has also resulted in inefficiency, disruption of the health information systems, weak coordination and loss of trained local technical staff, threatening the sustainability of health service delivery.¹⁵⁷ To further enhance accessibility to healthcare, outreach programs and innovative mechanisms to provide diagnostics and service enhancements including integration and digitalization of health systems needs to be addressed. During the lockdown, service delivery platforms were optimized to maintain essential health services. This included strengthening digital health services by leveraging existing internet connectivity in the country. The strengthening of telemedicine services aided the continuity of care at all levels of the health system during a time of significant disruption. This has created momentum for integrating digital health strategies into service delivery platforms in the future.

Pharmaceutical supplies for government facilities are managed by the State Trading Organization. Continuous supply and availability of essential medicines including some life-saving Emergency Obstetric Care (EMOC) drugs and modern contraceptive commodities is a consistent problem. The modern contraceptive method mix has not changed for more than a decade. In 2019, essential medicine availability at tertiary centres in Malé was about 80 per cent, and lower in the Atolls.¹⁵⁸ Although prescribed essential medicines are funded through the Aasandha public health insurance scheme, there is no expenditure and pricing control by Government for medicines. Supply, expenditures and pricing are predominantly controlled by the private sector.

In addition to the issues of availability of essential medicines, inappropriate, irrational use and overuse of medicines continues unchanged since 2011. There is no monitoring of prescribing, and the few clinical guidelines available are not adhered to. There are no drugs and therapeutic committees at hospitals, no continuing education on prescribing for doctors, and no public education on prudent use of medicines.¹⁵⁹ There is an emerging concern of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) leading to risk of morbidity and mortality from infectious diseases.¹⁶⁰ The inappropriate use of medicines is reflected in spending, with national health accounts indicators showing pharmaceuticals accounting for about 17 per cent of overall health spending in 2011, which increased to about 22 per cent in 2015. In 2017, it increased to 32 per cent.¹⁶¹ Discussion has initiated in the Cabinet about shifting the focus from branded medicines to generic medicines. This and other subsequent analysis supported by WHO have also prompted deeper health financing reforms, through generating cost-savings and facilitating more strategic purchasing of the health insurance agency.

Management of medical supplies is poor, with inadequate forecasting and inefficient procurement and stock management. A review of the expanded immunisation programme noted the centrality of improving vaccine management, including better temperature monitoring systems, installing computerised temperature monitors, training health care professionals in managing the cold chain, and scaling up web-based systems for monitoring vaccine supplies to a national level.¹⁶² Procurement is further complicated by national laws requiring suppliers to be registered with the Ministry of Health. This has led to artificially high prices, especially in drugs and pharmaceuticals, as a few local traders control the supply. The systems gaps in vaccine supply and cold chain, limited human resources in the national EPI programme combined with the emerging vaccine hesitancy, is a threat to sustaining the immunization coverage, and control of vaccine-preventable diseases.

¹⁵⁶ Ministry of Health and Gender (2014). National health workforce strategic plan 2014-2018

¹⁵⁷ World Health Organisation (2017). Maldives: A journey of health

¹⁵⁸ Santoso B (2019) Technical Support for Development of Strategic Implementation Plan (2020-2021) of the Maldives National Medicine Policy (2018-2023).

¹⁵⁹ World Health Organisation (2014). Report prepared using the WHO/SEARO workbook tool for undertaking a situational analysis of medicines in health care delivery in low- and middle-income countries.

¹⁶⁰ Ministry of Health (2019). National antimicrobial containment policy 2019-2023.

¹⁶¹ Ministry of Health (2019). National Health Accounts 2015-2017.

¹⁶² Dutta, S. (2019). EPI Supply Chain Status: EPI Review and Effective Vaccine Management Assessment using 2.0 Tool.

Mental health vulnerability among adolescents whereas revealed in the Global School Health Survey (2014), with 13 per cent of students self-reporting that they had seriously considered attempting suicide. With the establishment of the Center for Mental Health in 2019, Mental Health services are gradually expanding, yet the need exceeds the available specialists. As a result, the services at the central level if overburdened with long waitlists, and with new patients having to wait for several weeks to access services at the central level. The COVID-19 emergency has further escalated the demand for MHPSS services, with the mental health of people negatively affected in various ways. The current available MHPSS services are sporadic, and inadequate. Individuals with pre-existing. Mental health conditions and substance use problems before COVID-19, as well as those newly affected, will likely require timely and quality mental health services at different levels of the mental health pyramid.

Essential health services are established in all inhabitant islands with speed boats as ambulances for emergency transfers. However, there are no specific actions to improve access to health care for vulnerable population groups such as those with disabilities, mental health conditions and the elderly. In order to ensure universal access to healthcare, all Maldivians are covered by Aasandha, a healthcare financing scheme fully funded by the Government. Spending on health is high in Maldives when compared to other countries in similar developmental situations with the Total Health Expenditure (THE) in 2015-17 being 8.5 per cent of GDP.¹⁶³ Over the last one and half decades, the level of per capita health expenditure has risen phenomenally from \$454 during 2000 to about \$1,048 in 2015-17. With the introduction of Aasandha and other improvements in the provision of public health-care services, out of pocket (OOP) expenditure for Maldivian households has decreased from 49 to 29 per cent. An analysis of spending by functional classification reveals that nearly 60 per cent of all spending is directed towards outpatient care expenditure, followed by hospitalization expenses (19 per cent), medical goods (10 per cent) and the rest is accounted by administrative expenses. Preventive care expenses accounted for less than 0.5 per cent of overall spending during 2015-17.¹⁶⁴ The lack of a mandatory co-pay or other cost controls raises questions of cost effectiveness and sustainability. Furthermore, despite the high expenditure, access to health care remains a major concern, and is the biggest contributor to multi-dimensional poverty among women.

Improving access to and availability of quality healthcare services has been challenging. Factors include the geographically dispersed nature of the population, with unreliable transport networks, high reliance on international migrant health professionals (who are sometimes underutilized) and high turnover of the health workforce, as well as issues arising from total reliance on private and state-owned enterprises that operate on a business model for the purchase and supply of medicines and medical supplies.

A robust health system is imperative during a public health emergency such as COVID-19. The pandemic has exacerbated challenges faced by the sector in terms of capacities in the areas of procurement, supply chain management, forecasting, and stock management. In partnership with IFIs, the UN is supporting the Ministry of Health in bridging capacity gaps through transactional procurement, and logistical and advisory support.

The health expenditure of the elderly population (65+) amounts to MVR21.7 thousand (US\$1,385) per capita in 2016 which is two to three times higher than the other age groups indicating that health expenditure on the ageing population will continue to increase as the life expectancy increase for a morbid population.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Ministry of Health (2019). National Health Accounts 2015-2017.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*

¹⁶⁵ National Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA, 2020, Future of work in Maldives through National Transfer Account

Drug abuse

Illicit drug availability was identified in Maldives in the mid-1970s.¹⁶⁶ While many believe that there is a link with the introduction of tourism during the same period, there is no strong evidence to connect the two. Since this period also coincided with the introduction of drugs into other South Asian countries, it is equally plausible that drugs came with increased travel between neighbouring countries.¹⁶⁷ Subsequently, cannabis abuse (marijuana and hashish) took root among youth. 'Brown sugar', the low-grade heroin that is prevalent in the country, was introduced after mass arrests of Marijuana users in the early 1990s.¹⁶⁸ Drug abuse has since become a major problem. Over the last 30 years, availability of drug types in the Maldives has increased. A prison-based study in 2011 found that 70 per cent of inmates were sentenced for drug use. Among this group, a majority had used heroin (69.1 per cent) and cannabis (63.3 per cent) followed by alcohol (47.9 per cent).

The Maldives' geographic location makes it vulnerable to drug trafficking, with serious ramifications since this affects health and human lives, besides being an organized crime. From 2013-2018, drugs seized were smuggled into Maldives via sea and air, including through the postal services. Drugs are trafficked from Asian countries including Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Iran, UAE, Qatar, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Illegal substances were also trafficked from European countries including United Kingdom (UK), Belgium, Spain, Netherlands and Germany. Moreover, drugs were also smuggled from African countries: Ethiopia, Togo and Benin, and Brazil and Trinidad and Tobago in the Americas.¹⁶⁹

A recent study of wastewater from nine sites across Malé showed the most used illicit drugs were cannabis (THC), heroin (700 and 18 g/day), with lower use of cocaine and amphetamines (0.1–1.2 g/day).¹⁷⁰ Cannabis usage in Malé was comparable to measurements in other countries, while heroin was higher. Among cathinone, mephedrone was detected at the highest levels similar to other countries. Consumption of alcohol, which is not allowed in Maldives, was found (1.3 L/day/1000 inhabitants).¹⁷¹

Increasing drug abuse has been fueled by the large influx of adolescents and young people coming to Malé for education and to seek work away from family and parental guidance; overcrowding with poor housing conditions in Malé that forces young people to the streets, and unemployment and low productive engagement among youth. Peer pressure and social acceptance play a major part in escalating drug use, which is fast becoming the leading recreational activity for Maldivian youth.¹⁷² The situation is fuelled by inadequate law enforcement to control gangs and trafficking groups. Youth become easy prey to such groups and are used as peddlers, as they receive more lenient punishment as juveniles. However, once they have a police record, it is difficult to get employment and the youth become trapped in a vicious cycle.

The 2012 amendments to the drug law established a drug court with a mandate for treatment and rehabilitation. The drug court functions well but limited rehabilitation support services means that there is a huge back log of cases. The rate of relapse after treatment is very high, with one treatment centre and two detoxification centres for all of Maldives which have a long waitlist.¹⁷³ There is no national strategy or policy for prevention, particularly targeting the youngest to build resilience among young people. The NDA previously provided methadone replacement therapy, but it was discontinued due to a policy change in 2017.¹⁷⁴ Current statistics from NDA records show that the age of initiation to drug use is rapidly declining, synthetic drugs are increasing, and trafficking and distribution are becoming more pervasive.

¹⁶⁶ Azyb, A. (2014). Maldives under the Burden of Drugs. *Journal of Alcoholism & Drug Dependence*.

¹⁶⁷ Stakeholder interviews, National Drug Authority

¹⁶⁸ Azyb, A. (2014). Maldives under the Burden of Drugs. *Journal of Alcoholism & Drug Dependence*.

¹⁶⁹ UNODC, communication on 27 January 2020

¹⁷⁰ Fallati, L., Castiglioni, S., Galli, P., Riva, F., Gracia-Lor, E., González-Mariño, I., ... & Vai, M. (2020). Use of legal and illegal substances in Malé (Republic of Maldives) assessed by wastewater analysis. *Science of the Total Environment*, 698, 134207.

¹⁷¹ *ibid*

¹⁷² Azyb, A. (2014). Maldives under the Burden of Drugs. *Journal of Alcoholism & Drug Dependence*.

¹⁷³ Stakeholder interviews, National Drug Authority

¹⁷⁴ *ibid*

Additionally, the law does not cover rehabilitation for alcohol dependence which remains unaddressed. Although alcohol consumption is prohibited and punishable under Islamic law, statistics show that alcohol consumption is increasing. As alcohol is forbidden, there are no laws regarding its use, which goes unchecked. In 2009 the prevalence of alcohol consumption among children aged 13-15 years, was 6.7 per cent.¹⁷⁵ There is a data gap in substance abuse including alcohol with no data updates for almost a decade.

In 2009, in students in grades 8 to 10 (13-15 years), there was a 5.4 per cent prevalence of drug use (7.5 per cent for males and 3.2 per cent for females). Of students who had ever tried drugs, 67.7 per cent were 13 years old or younger when they first tried drugs.¹⁷⁶ The 2012 drug use study¹⁷⁷ estimated the prevalence at 6.64 per cent for Malé and 2.02 per cent in the Atolls. A majority of respondents who had used drugs were aged 15-19 years.

The 2012 study indicated that almost half of the drug users in both Malé and Atolls were employed, and a majority were unmarried. About 15 per cent in Malé and 9 per cent in the Atolls had been diagnosed with a psychological disorder.¹⁷⁸ About 6 per cent in Malé and 16 per cent in the Atolls reported that they had experienced symptoms of overdose at least once. A large proportion of current drug users were aware of and informed about HIV, but not many were informed of or had undergone testing or vaccinations against hepatitis B, hepatitis C or tuberculosis (TB) or other STIs. Sexual and Reproductive health (SHR) services are limited and family planning services remain unavailable.

While the law seeks rehabilitation, its implementation is through the criminal justice system for all offenses. A substantial proportion of drug users (61 per cent in Malé and 79 per cent in the Atolls) reported being arrested at least once. A significant proportion were convicted. As a result, large numbers of youth are “criminalised”. Once a person is identified as a drug user (either through voluntary treatment or the police system), the drug court requires the National Drug Authority (NDA) to undertake an assessment and propose a treatment plan. The criminal charge is suspended for those who complete treatment - if not they are sentenced to prison.¹⁷⁹ NDA provides assessment and residential rehabilitation at Himmafushi and community rehabilitation in Malé, Hulhumalé, Fuvahmulah, Addu and Gaafu Dhaalu atolls. However, capacity is limited with over 500 persons waiting for residential and over 350 waiting for community rehabilitation.¹⁸⁰ Due to limited capacity at NDA, over 180 cases await assessment required by the drug court. This situation is alarming, as clients who await assessment are kept in prison. This is particularly detrimental for young substance abusers, who might otherwise have a bigger chance of recovery if supported at an early stage.

Social protection

The Government adopted a ‘minimum social protection floor’ in 2009 and established the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) to coordinate and implement national social protection programmes.¹⁸¹ While subsequent government policies have made changes to the programmes, the social protection floor is more or less maintained. The Social Protection Law (2014) allows for a total of 11 social protection schemes of benefits, the current four programmes implemented by NSPA include allowances for single parents, foster parents, persons with disabilities, fisherman’s income assurance scheme, food subsidy, ‘Aasandha’ (health care financing scheme), and medical welfare for those services not covered by Aasandha.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁵ Ministry of Education (2009). Global school students’ health survey.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2012). National drug use survey, Maldives 2011-12.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

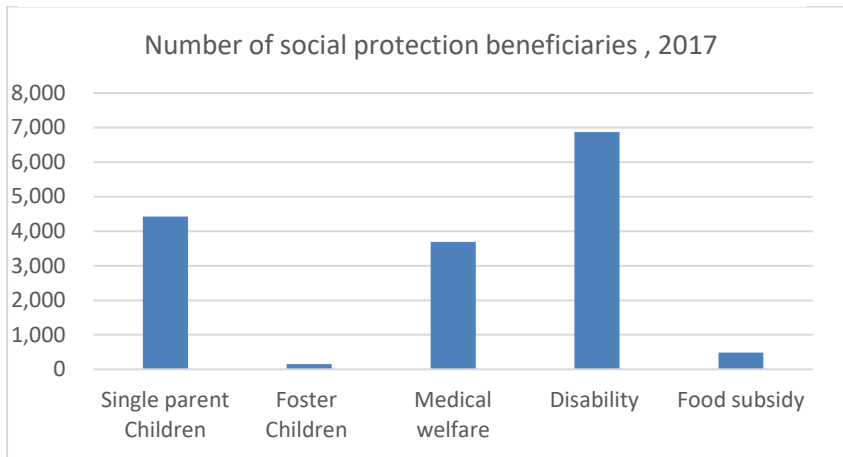
¹⁷⁹ Stakeholder interviews, National Drug Authority

¹⁸⁰ National Drug Authority (10 December 2019). Personal communication.

¹⁸¹ Ibrahim A (2012). Republic of the Maldives: Updating and Improving the Social Protection Index

¹⁸² National Social Protection Agency (2019). Services. <http://www.nspa.gov.mv/v2/>

Figure 5: Number of social protection beneficiaries, 2017



An evaluation of the single parent and foster parent benefit schemes showed that the design of the schemes subject beneficiaries and their children to unnecessary stigma, social exclusion and discrimination, and encourage dependence as a result of means testing.¹⁸³ It was observed that many eligible families miss out on assistance because of the complex and costly application process, and a lack of awareness of the schemes. Sharia is codified in the Family Act (2000) with fathers having to pay for child support after divorce. Implementation of the law is weak, and many women face challenges to access the support from biological fathers. Serial monogamy and polygamy leave women in a vicious poverty cycle.

An impact evaluation of the disability benefit showed limited reach, with only 25.5 per cent of the eligible population receiving the benefit.¹⁸⁴ This is driven largely by the non-availability of assessment services in the Atolls and its limitation to only one facility in Male'. A disconnect between the financial benefit schemes and social services related to the benefit schemes was also observed, such as those receiving disability benefit needing to reapply for an assistive device or vice versa. A universal child benefit scheme has been recommended to overcome these challenges.

The core capacity gap in social protection relates to the absence of a unified and universal system, and separate data systems and processes for each scheme. This results in a number of leakages and lost opportunities for providing social protection to the vulnerable and non-covered informal sector workers. Hence an integrated data system that draws on vital registration and links to health and education services is critical to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the schemes in terms of coverage and impact.

Maldives' pension system has witnessed tremendous reform since 2008. The Maldives Pension Act (2009) establishes a two-pillar pension system, including a new contributory pension scheme based on a defined contribution (DC) model with centralized recordkeeping - the Maldives Retirement Pension Scheme (MRPS), and a non-contributory citizen's pension – the Old Age Basic Pension (OABP), aimed at providing an income floor for all Maldivians aged 65 and above. The MRPS first replaced the two pension schemes that were operating solely for government employees and extended coverage to the entire formal sector labour force. In the second phase, the scheme has been opened to self-employed workers who can subscribe to MRPS on a voluntary basis - they are encouraged to do so with a co-contribution incentive provided by the government. Employee and employer both contribute 7 per cent of employee's pensionable wage to his or her Retirement Saving Account in MRPS.¹⁸⁵ Employees can contribute more voluntarily. In addition to MRPS, nine government

¹⁸³ Tran A & Druzca K (2020). Evaluation of the Single Parent and Foster Care Social Protection Schemes in the Maldives. Unpublished

¹⁸⁴ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Eskey (2020). Maldives social protection and disability study 2017-2019. Preliminary results.

¹⁸⁵ Ibrahim A (2012). Republic of the Maldives: Updating and Improving the Social Protection Index

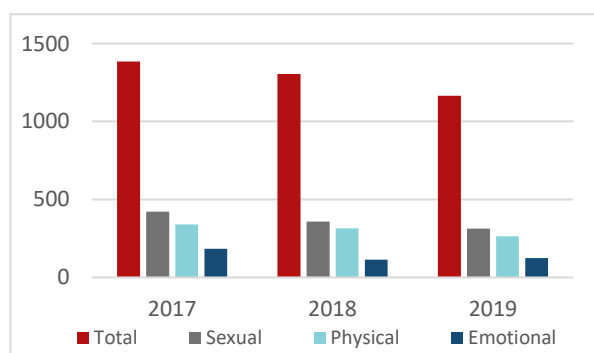
institutions have also set up institution-specific pension schemes for their employees following a defined benefit model. Since women are concentrated in the middle or low paying jobs both in state institutions and the private sector, the women’s retirement pension fund (18%) is much lower than that of men¹⁸⁶. In 2014, the President introduced Senior Citizen Allowance (SCA) to all Maldivians aged 65 and above on top of OABP. In 2018, there were 16,835 Maldivians receiving OABP benefits and 17,310 receiving SCA benefits.¹⁸⁷ Coverage is universal. The monthly pension benefit from OABP is MVR 2,300, with the SCA benefit providing every eligible Maldivian senior a total government benefit of MVR 5,000 (about \$325). OABP, SCA and the institution-specific pensions are financed from the general budget and in 2015 accounted for 2.6 per cent of GDP.

Social protection services

Child protection programs for institutional state care of children is a fully funded government program. Children taken into State Care are provided shelter in two Children’s Homes in Villingili and one in Hulhumalé. The institutions provide basic needs to children of both sexes who meet general eligibility requirements.¹⁸⁸ In August 2017, they accommodated 66 children aged 13 – 18 years and 100 children below the age of 13.¹⁸⁹ Children are taken into state care for reasons of abandonment, maltreatment and abuse by parents or guardians or where parents are in prison. Currently the attitude and practice of taking children into state care do not reflect the principle of institutionalization as a last resort. These attitudes also hinder the placement of children in family type settings as well as the process of reintegration back into their communities. Older children are sometimes returned to families after assessments and in rare cases are placed in foster care, but most stay in state care till they are 18 years of age. Many children in custody are from drug using parents, who do not have their reproductive rights met.

The Home for People with Special Needs (HSPN) is a government-funded institution located in K. Guraidhoo and administered under the DGFPS. The main eligibility criteria for admission to the HSPN include medical certification that the applicant is suffering from severe mental illness, is without family support, and could pose significant risk to communities if left untreated.¹⁹⁰ The HSPN allows abandoned elderly people without a caregiver to be accommodated at the institution. The benefits provided to the residents include medical care and rehabilitation programmes.

Figure 6: Violence against children, Maldives¹⁹¹



In addition to State Care, children who are victims of domestic violence, abuse and neglect are provided temporary shelter in Safe Homes established at the Family and Children’s Service Centres (FCSCs) in atolls. The mandate of Safe Homes includes safeguarding the rights assured in the Constitution to women and children, who are provided temporary shelter and community reintegration services, as well as psychosocial support. Currently there are FCSCs in all atolls and four Safe Homes (located in H.Dh Kulhudhufushi, G.Dh Thinadhoo, Sh.

Funadhoo and S. Hithadhoo).¹⁹² The conceptualization of the FCSCs was done with good intentions, however, the required skilled staff and other required resources are limited and appropriate investments are not made to meet the demand for services at these facilities. In 2017 family protection services attended to 1372 cases

¹⁸⁶ National Bureau of Statistics (2020) Statistical Yearbook of Maldives. Pension and Social Protection Tables 18.1

¹⁸⁷ National Bureau of Statistics (2018). Statistical Yearbook of Maldives. Pension and Social Protection Tables: 18.4 and 18.7

¹⁸⁸ http://gender.gov.mv/en/?page_id=2799

¹⁸⁹ National Social Protection Agency (2019). Services. <http://www.nspa.gov.mv/v2/>

¹⁹⁰ Ibrahim A (2012). Republic of the Maldives: Updating and Improving the Social Protection Index

¹⁹¹ Derived from Case statistics reports 2017, 2018, 2019. Ministry of Gender and Family.

¹⁹² http://gender.gov.mv/en/?page_id=2799

of child abuse and neglect, 424 cases of gender-based violence, 116 disabled cases and 72 elderly cases of abuse and neglect.¹⁹³

Violence against women, especially intimate partner violence has increased from 1 in 5¹⁹⁴ to 1 in 4¹⁹⁵ over the years 2007 to 2016. Although reporting has increased to the authorities, lack of legal sanctions for perpetrators remain limited. Violence is perceived as a criminal issue, and not a public health or economic loss, the services available for survivors is limited and requires a lengthy procedure to seek the service. To date there is no GBV screening at health facilities and a shelter for GBV survivors is not operational.

Environmental Context

The main environmental drivers in Maldives are climate change, population growth, urbanization and overcrowding in urban areas, migration, and rapid economic growth. These factors directly or indirectly bring about habitat destruction, biodiversity loss and deteriorate air and water quality. Population growth and economic development result in increased use of resources and waste generation.¹⁹⁶

Coastal protection is a high priority. Coral reefs, seagrass beds, lagoons, beaches, and areas of mangrove form the coastal ecosystem of the Maldives. The reef systems of the Maldives are the seventh largest globally and are highly rich and diverse, hosting several species which are globally significant.¹⁹⁷ The economy relies heavily on tourism and fisheries, which depend entirely on the coastal and marine environment¹⁹⁸. It also plays an important role in providing food security, livelihoods, and income.

The beaches are highly dynamic and beach erosion is one of the most significant challenges faced by islands. Wetlands or mangrove areas are found in about 74 islands.¹⁹⁹ The main threats to coastal and marine environments include increase in sea surface temperature (SST) brought by climate change, pollution, and coastal modification²⁰⁰. Warming of ocean temperature due to climate change is a key factor impacting corals and altering coral reef communities. High SST is known to cause coral bleaching and is also associated with crown of thorns outbreaks.

Coastal and marine pollution arise from land-based solid waste (especially one time use plastic) and untreated sewage disposal²⁰¹, or sea-based sources such as oil pollution and ballast water. Coastal modification including sand mining, cutting channels, reclamation and harbour development are significant threats to the marine and coastal environment.²⁰² Efforts towards protection and conservation of coral reefs include establishment of the Inter-Agency Task force on Coral Bleaching and a coral reef monitoring programme.

Land reclamation has become part of the development in the country and a solution to the limited available land, transforming the islands over the years to accommodate more human activities. Nonexistence of regulations on land reclamation have been identified as a main challenge for the safety of built environment.

¹⁹³ Ministry of Gender and Family (2019). Case statistics 2017.

¹⁹⁴ Ministry of Gender (2007) Women's Health and Life Experiences

¹⁹⁵ Ministry of Health and ICF (2016) Demographic and Health Survey

¹⁹⁶ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016.

¹⁹⁷ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016.

¹⁹⁸ According to ADB, as of 2017, 45 islands are very severely eroded, 20 are severely eroded, and 18 are slightly eroded.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰⁰ Apart from land reclamation, several other human activities have increased vulnerability of land, beaches, and human settlements. They include construction of poorly designed coastal infrastructure, poorly engineered coastal protection measures, removal of coastal vegetation, and sand mining. Coral reefs have a critical coastal protection function, yet there have been a number of human stresses on the reef system such as coral mining, reef entrance blasting, dredging, solid waste disposal and sewage disposal that has affected the health, integrity of coast. Apart from land reclamation, several other human activities have increased vulnerability of land, beaches, and human settlements. They include construction of poorly designed coastal infrastructure, poorly engineered coastal protection measures, removal of coastal vegetation, and sand mining. Coral reefs have a critical coastal protection function, yet there have been several human stresses on the reef system such as coral mining, reef entrance blasting, dredging, solid waste disposal and sewage disposal that has affected the health, integrity and productivity.

²⁰¹ In the absence of sewage treatment, the collected sewage is discharged untreated into the sea via two outfalls, endangering the marine environment and putting fisheries and tourism at risk. This is particularly critical in Hulhumalé, which was reclaimed at high cost and is increasingly dependent on high-end tourism, international business, and commercial operations for financial sustainability

²⁰² *ibid*

Currently no guidance or regulation covers land reclamation. This is a serious gap that needs to be filled to ensure the construction safety of these sites as well as to reduce environmental impact and induced hazards. Land reclamation leads to drainage issues and flooding during heavy rainfall. The newly reclaimed areas do not have a coastal vegetation belt, increasing the risk of erosion and increases impacts from ocean induced flooding events. Associated environmental issues are experienced by inhabitants including ground water contamination, degradation of coastal areas, and depletion of vegetation.

For the Maldives, the impacts of climate change are of utmost concern, being at the forefront of its adverse impacts. For a long time, environmental factors have impacted on global migration flows, as people have historically left places with harsh or deteriorating conditions. Maldives is no exception, and environmental change remains one of the key drivers of population migration. Coastal erosion, depletion of ground water lens, and damages due to extreme weather events are some of the recorded factors which have contributed to population migration historically in the Maldives. However, whenever the discussion around climate change or migration arises, they are often considered separate issues. Despite the vulnerabilities and distinct needs, knowledge, and skills of women to impacts of climate change as well as on mitigation and adaptation, they have been largely underrepresented in climate action, decision making and planning. Climate change affects women disproportionately due to underlying gender inequalities and gender roles (such as care taking, household work, decision-making, and socially accepted/appropriate behaviour and work for women and men).

Biodiversity

The biodiversity of the Maldives contributes to 71 per cent of the nation's employment, 49 per cent of public revenue, 62 per cent of foreign exchange, 98 per cent of exports and 89 per cent of GDP²⁰³. Various studies conducted in the Maldives report 429 to 583 plants including at least 14 species of mangroves. Marine diversity is outstandingly rich and highly diverse and includes internationally threatened species. The fish diversity comprises over 1,200 species of which gobies are the most diverse group. Significant species, among others, include the whale shark, the oceanic manta ray, and the reef manta ray. Loss of habitat associated with dredging of harbours and reclamation, exploitation of resources, invasive alien species, pests and pathogens, unsound land use practices, poor land tenure policies and climate change are the main threats to biodiversity.

International agreements related to biodiversity conservation to which Maldives is party include the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the International Plant Protection Convention. Maldives is a member of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). Maldives is a signatory to the Indian Ocean-Southeast Asian Marine Turtle Memorandum of Understanding. The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) is a protection and conservation policy and planning document.

There are 42 Protected Areas (PA) covering 24,494 hectares (0.2 per cent of the national territory) and three biosphere reserves in addition to Baa, Addu and Fuvahmulak have been declared biosphere reserves. Only one is managed with an effective regulation (Hanifaru Marine PA in 2011).²⁰⁴ 103 bird species, turtles, rays and skates and the black turtle (Kanzu kahanbu) have also been protected. Species protected under the Fisheries Act include dolphins, Napoleon wrasses, giant clams, black coral, whale shark, conch, whales, lobster (berried females and those smaller than 25cm in length) and sharks. Baa Atoll was the country's first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve designated in 2012, with new efforts to designate Maldives as a UNESCO biosphere reserve.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of the intimate relationship among humans, animals, and the environment. The transmission pathways of diseases, such as COVID-19, from animals to humans highlight the extent to which human activity is placing increasing pressures on the health of our natural environment with damaging consequences to the society. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and

²⁰³ ibid

²⁰⁴ ibid

Ecosystem Services (IPBES), alerted that future pandemics will increase, spread more rapidly, do more damage to the world economy and affect more people than COVID-19, unless there is a transformative change in the global approach to focusing on disease prevention.

As governments introduce stimulus packages to support job creation, poverty reduction, development and economic growth, this needs to focus on “building back better”, by ensuring that the health of the planet and natural resource base, as well as people’s well-being are not undermined, while efforts should be made towards capturing opportunities for leap-frogging to green investments, such as renewable energy, and smart housing, to be guided by the principles and standards of sustainable production and consumption. Expanding opportunities for valuing and investing in nature as part of the response to the COVID-19 crisis is essential.

Fresh water²⁰⁵

The conventional freshwater resources available in Maldives mainly are in the form of a rain fed shallow groundwater lens on each island, small fresh or brackish water ponds on a few islands and rainwater. Groundwater aquifers on islands lie at an average depth of 1-1.5m below the ground surface. In many inhabited islands of Maldives, freshwater lenses have been depleted as a result of salt water ingress due to extraction of groundwater from shallow aquifers, often through illegal pumping during construction of foundations.²⁰⁶ The quality of groundwater has been further deteriorated due to disposal of untreated septic and wastewater into the ground and unplanned disposal of solid waste on land. In addition, development projects including paved roads decrease the ground surface availability for groundwater recharge.

Non-conventional freshwater resources available include desalinated water and bottled drinking water. Due to the current status of groundwater sources, rainwater and desalinated water are the most important sources of drinking water. In Malé, 76 per cent of households use bottled water and 23 per cent use desalinated piped water for drinking.²⁰⁷ Limited space in built-up islands such as Malé do not allow for water storage expansion.

In the Atolls 11 per cent of households have access to desalinated water, 75 per cent of the households use rainwater for drinking and 5 per cent get rainwater from places outside their household premises.²⁰⁸ The majority of the atoll population use rainwater for drinking purposes. Continuous requests for emergency water shipments show that the amount of rainwater harvested is not sufficient to last the dry season. Future rainfall projections show an increase over northern and central regions, but a decrease in precipitation in the southern regions for the years 2021-2050. For the years 2082-2100 an overall increase in precipitation is projected.

Currently, nearly 58 per cent of the total population has access to improved sanitation systems.²⁰⁹ The various sewerage systems in place include bore sewerage, conventional deep sewer gravity and sewerage vacuum sewerage systems. However, sewerage is untreated and piped sewerage discharges offshore.

Maldives is moving towards an integrated water resource management approach to address water insecurity. With the increase in construction, more water from the ground is pumped into the sea. No plan to recover the freshwater lens even for agricultural purposes through improving drainage.

Climate change, sea level rise & disasters

The Government is committed to boost its efforts to enhance climate resilience and implement multi-sectoral and sustainable solutions to mitigate damage to Maldivian ecosystems. In 2019, a Bill on Climate Change was introduced to Parliament which seeks to establish a Climate Change Council to scrutinize developmental

²⁰⁵ A fire at a desalination plant in 2014 led to a 10-day suspension of all water supply to Malé, declaration of a state of disaster and US\$20 million in relief operations, highlighting the vulnerabilities of the water supply to shocks.

²⁰⁶ *ibid*

²⁰⁷ Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017.

²⁰⁸ *ibid*

²⁰⁹ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016

projects for its impact on the environment, and a Climate Change Fund to enhance the implementation measures of adaption and mitigation which also envisages to enhance the public-private partnership.

The Government is also committed to implement decentralized, region-specific waste disposal mechanisms to instill sustainable waste management practices. The first Regional Waste Management Strategy and Action Plan was launched in 2019. Provision of clean drinking water is a continuing challenge. As such, a Bill on Water and Sewerage was submitted to the Parliament in November 2019.

Maldives initiated the 'Climate Smart Resilient Islands Initiative', entailing pragmatic and holistic measures to enhance climate resilience, establish inter-island connectivity, improve food, and water security, promote green tourism, build climate-resilient infrastructure, and transition to renewable energy sources.

Maldives has ratified the Kigali Amendment which will phase down Hydro fluorocarbons. Maldives has also pledged to phase out single-use plastics by 2023.

Sea level rise is recognized as the greatest threat to Maldives, as this increases the probability of land inundation. The small size and low elevation of the islands increase vulnerability to coastal hazards. Extreme events have become frequent over the past decades, while some events have led to significant economic losses. Sea level records for the past 20 years shows a rise of 3.753mm and 2.933mm per year in Malé and Gan respectively. Maximum sea surface height is projected to increase between 0.40m to 0.48m by 2100.²¹⁰

Climate change scenarios also indicate increase in average annual temperatures which could affect fish production as higher sea surface temperatures lead to coral bleaching and could also affect influx of tourist who have been attracted by rich aquatic life.²¹¹ In the Representative Concentration Payway (RCP) 8.5 scenario (with no mitigation efforts, high emissions), Maldives is projected to be warmer in the 2030s and 2040s, especially in the northern atolls. Average temperature will increase from 29.05o C– 29.60o C in the 2020s and 2030s to 29.60°C–30.15°C in the 2040s. Under a moderate GHG emissions scenario (RCP 4.5.) In this decade, the average annual temperature in Maldives (with the exception of Haafu Alifu) is 28.4°C–28.8°C. Maldives will have warmer days (average of 29.05°C–30.15°C) in the 2030s and 2040s, particularly in northern Maldives where the average annual temperature will range from 29.60°C to 30.15°C.

Natural disaster risks to Maldives as identified by the 2006 disaster risk analysis, include earthquakes and tsunamis, cyclones, thunderstorms, floods (due to rain), drought, storm surges strong winds and tornadoes. The vulnerability assessment of the Adaptation Plan of Action 2007 identified the following areas which are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts: land, beach and human settlements, critical infrastructure, tourism, fisheries, human health, water resources and coral reef biodiversity.

Climate change affects the enjoyment of a range of human rights. Extreme weather events are pressing problems and potentially threaten the enjoyment of the right to life and the right to health. Slow-onset disasters like water shortages due to significant changes to weather patterns and salinity intrusion impact people's right to water and sanitation which are derived from the rights to health and an adequate standard of living found within the ICESCR.

The impacts of the climate crisis and disasters disproportionately affect women and girls. Weather-related disasters lower the life expectancy of women more than men. The stronger the disaster, the stronger its effect on the gender gap in life expectancy. Socially constructed gender-specific vulnerabilities of women together with everyday socio-economic patterns lead to higher female disaster mortality rates.²¹² In addition, the mortality rate of people with disabilities during disasters is two to four times higher than that of persons without disabilities due to exclusion from disaster risk reduction policies, plans and programs and that

²¹⁰ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016

²¹¹ ADB. Multi hazard risk atlas.

²¹² E Neumayer and T Plümper. The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender gap in Life Expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97(3). pp. 551-566.

emergency-related information and warnings are often not accessible to persons with disabilities.²¹³ ²¹⁴ In post-disaster situations, women may not be able to return to work or may only have access to insecure employment, education becomes a lesser priority for girls, and women and girls' nutritional levels and health deteriorate further.²¹⁵ There are multiple and intersecting factors that add to vulnerability of women and PWDS and that influence their adaptive capacity, such as ethnic origin, social status, sexual and gender orientation, marital status, being head of a household, migration, minority and citizenship status and age.²¹⁶

The National Disaster Management Centre has been supporting women in rural areas to participate in Community Emergency Responses Teams (CERT) established on the islands. The rate of women's participation in the CERTs ranges from 21% of the team to 74%, depending on the islands. Of all the rural populations trained by the National Disaster Management Centre in the last four years, approximately 50% have been women. Additionally, with the support of the UN in Maldives, the Government has been piloting initiatives with the MOGFSS and Island councils to ensure that disaster mitigation and disaster management strategies are put in place. Through these pilot programs on selected islands, there have been attempts through the WDCs and broader Island Councils, to engage women in the development of the strategies. Initial assessments of the impact disasters have on women in these pilot islands, as well as the role women play in responding, have been carried out. In a number of island contexts, as fisheries are often the primary employment, with men away for long periods. When natural disasters strike, it is often the women, children and elderly who are responding. The pilot programme is now closing, and lessons from the pilot project indicate that more work needs to be done towards raising awareness among women as to why their participation in the development of these strategies is essential.

Droughts, already having an impact on food security and pregnant and lactating women, young children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition.²¹⁷ The climate crisis reduces access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation. Lack of adequate access to safe water and sanitation is a key factor in maternal and child mortality.²¹⁸ Damaged toilets or latrines and disrupted water supply also mean that women and girls forgo daily hygiene practices. Not being able to access toilets or latrines can mean women wait until after dark, or refrain from drinking water during the day, increasing risks of urinary tract infections.²¹⁹ Managing menstrual hygiene in times of water scarcity can inhibit girls' and women's engagement in daily, family and community activities, education, as well as contributing to and benefiting from relief efforts.

Climate-induced loss of livelihoods and reduction in income can have particularly negative implications for women.²²⁰ High food prices and food scarcity may lead women and young girls to engage in transactional sexual relationships in exchange for food and other basic household needs. As food resources become scarce, the greater the likelihood for gender discrimination in access to food or extreme coping mechanisms were women are often the first to skip meals.²²¹ Research shows that child marriage has been used as an extreme coping strategy following infrastructure, social and financial stresses posed by the climate crisis and weather-related disasters.²²² ²²³ Sanitation and clean water are essential to the achievement of human rights.

²¹³ F. Katsunori. The Great East Japan Earthquake and Disabled Persons. Japanese Society for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities

²¹⁴ - Analytical Study on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Context of Climate Change OHCHR 2020

²¹⁵ - Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2014.

²¹⁶ - Analytical Study on Gender-responsive Climate Action for the full and Effective Enjoyment of the Rights of Women. UNOHCHR, 2019

²¹⁷ C Rylander, J.Ø Odland and T.M Sandanger. Climate Change and the Potential Effects on Maternal and Pregnancy Outcomes: An Assessment of the Most Vulnerable – The Mother, Fetus, and Newborn Child. *Global Health Action*, 6. 2013.

²¹⁸ T Mahon and M Fernades. Menstrual Hygiene in South Asia: A Neglected Issue for WASH Programmes. *Gender & Development* 18, no. 1 (2010): 102-103. 2010

²¹⁹ - Identifying Opportunities for Action on Climate Change and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women. 2014.

²²⁰ R Kumar Dhir. *Gender, Labor and a Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for all*. ILO, 2017.

²²¹ G Pattugalan. Linking Food Security, Food Assistance and Protection from Gender Based Violence: WFP's Experience, Humanitarian Exchange. Humanitarian Practice Network, 2014.

²²² - Rural Women Tackle Drought-affected Mozambique's Rise in Child Marriage'. UN Women, 2017

²²³ - Marry Before Your House is Swept Away. Child Marriage in Bangladesh. Human Rights Watch, 2015

Lack of satisfactory water and sanitation services has a greater impact on women and children, including as a driver of risks associated with GBV. Water scarcity often mean walking increased distances to remote locations to access water which puts particularly women, girls and boys at risk of harassment, sexual assault and rape.²²⁴ As people lack access to safe drinking water and face food scarcity as a result of the climate crisis, they are more likely to migrate or become displaced.²²⁵ Violence against women increased under the stresses of disasters and displacement. This includes early and forced marriages and trafficking.²²⁶

As most of the country is less than one metre above sea level, loss of land through sea level rise impacts the right to self-determination, the right to housing and the right to an adequate standard of living which ultimately can lead to issues of displacement and migration. The adverse effects of climate change have disproportionate impacts on the rights of person, groups, and people in vulnerable situation such as children, women, people with disabilities, and people living in poverty.

The Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights in 2019 recognized climate change is an existential threat to the Maldives. She reported that some development projects approved in the recent past without adequate disaster mitigation plans resulted in increased flooding, loss of natural heritage such as mangroves, increasing sedimentation (which contributes to coral bleaching) and resultant loss of livelihoods, including by women. She noted the importance of giving further consideration to potential conflicts of interest in decision-making around environment, development projects and tourism to avoid harmful effects and encouraged the Government to consider inviting the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights to visit the Maldives and to conduct further research in these areas. She further recommended that disaster mitigation efforts incorporate cultural traditional knowledge, such as about the movement of sand and fishing practices, and cultural heritage as a powerful resource to address the challenges caused by climate change and as a means to build resilience. Noting that civil society expressed the need for further awareness-raising about climate change and initiatives to combat denial of climate change, the Special Rapporteur encouraged greater consultation with the civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of policy, and, in particular, the further promotion of youth leaders.

The observed impacts and projected risks in natural and human systems due to the potential rise of global temperature to 1.5°C and higher levels²²⁷ presents major risks to way of life to the average Maldivian. Slow-onset disasters such as beach erosions, sea swells, storm surges and flooding with increasing intensity every year could exacerbate the economic and social conditions that forces island communities to relocate. This may lead to an influx of population from remote island communities to urban centers. As a country with a tourism model developed around its natural environment particularly the vast sandy beaches and the tropical coral reefs, the direct relationship between increasing global temperatures, intensifying storms, elevated thermal stress, and the loss of coral reefs presents a major risk.

The current Strategic National Action Plan for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation 2010-2020 was developed for the period 2010-2020 and identifies four areas of action; Enabling environment for good democratic governance; Empowered and capable communities; Resilient communities with access to technology, knowledge and other resources; and Risk-sensitive regional and local development.²²⁸ However, the plan was not formally adopted and so is not implemented in a systematic manner. Large infrastructure development projects had been prioritized in recent years. Programmes for community empowerment for disaster preparedness are being supported by the Maldives Red Crescent.²²⁹

²²⁴ - Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing Risk, Promoting Resilience and Aiding Recovery. Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2015

²²⁵ - Climate Change, Disasters and Gender-Based Violence in the Pacific. UN Women, 2014

²²⁶ - Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014.

²²⁷ Global Warming of 1.5°C an IPCC special report - https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_Low_Res.pdf

²²⁸ Government of Maldives (2010). Strategic National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation 2010-2020

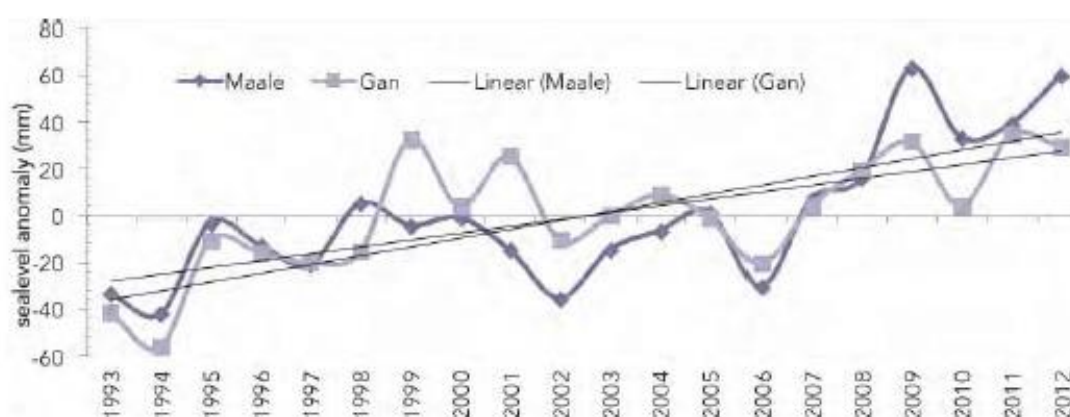
²²⁹ Stakeholder interviews, Ministry of Environment

In addition to the national plan, sector specific plans exist such as the UN Contingency Plan for Emergencies, Health Emergency Operations Plan and School Emergency Operational Plans and the Velana International Airport Emergency Response Plan, that guide preparedness and response activities. However, there is a shortage of resources to implement and scale up the plans.

Maldives has incorporated climate change adaptation and mitigation into sectoral planning and development - the Maldives Climate Change Policy Framework (MCCPF) is the key policy document. Maldives aims to undertake adaptation actions and opportunities and build climate resilient infrastructure to address the current and future impacts of climate change. As the national disaster preparedness and response plan needs to be reviewed and updated, and national and local-level DRR strategies are still to be developed, there is a current opportunity for linking the plan with the MCCPF and redefining its priorities.

Given the threat of displacement induced due to climate change, there is a need for development of a national framework on the rights, responsibilities and standards relevant to persons affected by internal displacement, in line with international human rights standards and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and to develop national policies to ensure protection of the rights of people compelled to migrate internationally due to climate change and environmental degradation. It is crucial to ensure that the affected groups participate in decision-making and policymaking regarding plans and policies aimed at disaster management and in response to the impact of climate change.

Figure 7: Sea level anomaly for Malé and Gan from 1991 to 2012



Air quality

Rapid urbanization and increased economic growth have significantly contributed to the deterioration of the air quality in densely populated islands such as Malé, which is facing increased air pollution due to the dramatic growth of motorised land and sea transport, diesel power generation, construction and open burning of waste on the neighbouring island Thilafushi. Waste burning at dumpsites and in backyards contribute to air pollution. In addition to local pollution, transboundary pollution is also observed to affect air quality of the Maldives. A receptor observatory to study long range transboundary pollution is strategically located in the Maldives. Measurements made by the Maldives Climate Observatory of Hanimaadhoo (MCOH) show that emissions from mainland South Asia can be transported to the Maldives over the ocean.²³⁰

Significant pollutants affecting ambient air quality include PM_{2.5} and GHGs. The National Green House Gas (GHG) Inventory of 2011 reports that the main GHGs are CO₂, CH₄ and N₂O. The total emissions of Maldives for the year 2015 were 1,536.04 Gg of CO₂ equivalent with CO₂ comprising 96 per cent of that amount, CH₄ 3 per cent and N₂O 1 per cent of the total emissions.²³¹ While no studies have been conducted in Maldives to determine the link between health impacts and air quality, the morbidity of respiratory diseases remains high

²³⁰ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016

²³¹ Ministry of Environment (2020) Maldives First Biennial update Report under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

and shows an increasing trend from year to year. Maldives is signatory to a number of international conventions relating to air pollution control, however at the national level legal frameworks are weak.

The speed of Maldives' clean energy transition makes it a global leader in tackling household air pollution, with just 6 per cent of households now exposed to this form of air pollution.²³² Maldives has joined the Breathe Life campaign, the first country in WHO South East Asia Region to join the campaign.

Energy, chemicals & waste management

Due to a lack of conventional energy resources in Maldives, all its energy demands are met through imports of fossil fuel (80 per cent diesel). In addition to pollution generated by its use, the continued high reliance on imported fossil fuel increases the vulnerability of Maldives to external fuel price fluctuations. Limited fuel storage is a further challenge. High government expenditure on fuel imports is also identified as a risk to the energy security of the country. A notable achievement with regard to fuel use is that more than 50 per cent of households have access to clean fuel for cooking.

Efforts are ongoing to introduce renewable energy technologies, as well as to promote energy conservation and efficiency throughout the Maldives. The total solar capacity installed has increased from 52.1kWp in 2006 to 4,064.91kWp in 2014.²³³ Ongoing projects are expected to increase solar energy generation to 33 per cent of energy production in the country. This includes increased use of solar energy generation in public infrastructure including public hospitals and schools. However, thus far the growth of solar has served to supplement capacity, especially in the atolls, rather than replacing fossil fuel use.

The main pattern of usage of chemicals in the Maldives is in the form of consumption of petroleum products. From 2010 to 2014, the expenditure on chemical imports has increased by 104.87 per cent, with an average increase of 26.21 per cent per annum.²³⁴ Chemicals may have a range of adverse ecological and health effects, ranging from degradation of soil, groundwater contamination, marine pollution, to affecting fish and other biota. In addition, various health effects are associated with chemicals and their pollutants. The high dependence on chemicals and its potential consequences, combined with limited capacity makes effective management of chemicals a key issue. Maldives has a cross-sectoral approach in chemical administration. However, due to the lack of specific legislation on chemical management, regulatory mechanisms for chemical management remain weak.²³⁵²³⁶

Over recent decades, waste generation increased in the Maldives, particularly driven by population growth, changing consumption patterns, barriers in transportation and rapid growth of the tourism sector. The per capita waste generation is estimated as 1.7Kg, 0.8Kg and 3.5Kg in Malé, atolls and resorts respectively.²³⁷ The increase of waste after COVID-19 is yet to be analyzed. With the tourism expansion plans and rapid urbanization means, production of waste will also increase with the increase in population and this aspect is not considered in other sectoral plans. The Malé region is responsible for a significant proportion of waste generated within the country. Waste is generally not segregated at household level and only a few islands practice composting. Waste from the Malé region and most resorts is transported to Thilafushi, where it is stockpiled and burned. The most common method of disposal is open burning, leading to pollution and generating conditions harmful to public health. The Maldives recognizes the importance of improving the existing methods of waste management. The first regional waste management center established at R. Vandhoo is designed for integrated waste management. However, gender dimensions need to be taken into consideration in waste management to address the issues from a whole of society approach.

²³² Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Ministry of Health, Maldives

²³³ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016

²³⁴ *ibid*

²³⁵ <https://www.itopf.org/knowledge-resources/countries-territories-regions/countries/maldives/>

²³⁶ <https://edition.mv/news/18943>

²³⁷ *ibid*

Health care waste management has been improved with more scientific and environmentally friendly autoclaves for disposal. A National Healthcare Waste Management Strategy for 2016-2021 has been developed and implementation initiated within 14 hospitals at Atoll level and nine at island level.²³⁸

It is starkly apparent in Maldives that its future growth must look beyond the current global “take-make-waste” extractive industrial model. The Maldives is beginning to look toward developing a circular economy, one which aims to redefine growth, focusing on positive society-wide benefits. This would entail gradually decoupling economic activity from the consumption of finite resources and designing waste out of the system. Underpinned by a transition to renewable energy sources, a circular model would be based on three principles:

- Design out waste and pollution
- Keep products and materials in use
- Regenerate natural systems

Maldives has a potential advantage in introducing these principles, given its size and the opportunity to design new infrastructure for circularity.

The Maldives biennial climate change update report 2020 notes that capacity for measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) needs further enhancement with regard to legal, procedural and institutional aspects as well as MRV data systems. Other capacity gaps identified include technical and technological capacity for weather and climate monitoring, integrated national level geographic information systems (GIS) for disaster management, information, communication and coordination and monitoring and managing human health impacts of climate change, particularly floods, sea swells and air pollution. Underlying these capacity development needs are requirements of financing human resource development and providing regulatory authority at local governance levels for implementing the national regulations (including training and remuneration of environmental protection rangers at atoll levels).

There are inadequate public measures towards environment protection and mitigation of climate change effects. Public awareness and empowerment programmes are conducted through school curricula and through NGOs on aspects of environment protection such as reduction of waste and energy consumption. However, these appear to have limited impact on practices at household level, which need to be addressed with more consistent implementation of regulatory actions, policy commitment and efforts to generate public support and trust in government institutions.²³⁹

Interlinkages Among the Three Dimensions of Sustainable Development

The country’s population structure provides a potential demographic dividend - an opportunity to accelerate economic growth. With fewer births each year, the country’s working-age population grows larger in relation to the young and old dependent population. With more people in the labour force and fewer people to support, the country can exploit this window of opportunity for rapid economic growth – if the right social and economic investments and policies are made in health, education, governance and the economy. While the benefits of a dividend can be great, the gains are neither automatic nor guaranteed.

The current national developmental model, with a high concentration of services in a select few islands, coupled with a strong emphasis on health and education spending (particularly higher education), provides an excellent basis for a dividend-driven economic take off. However, several key elements are imbalanced or missing. Investment in infrastructure is not coupled with comprehensive human resources capacity planning and development. This is largely due to the endemic shortage of skilled personnel, due to the size of the country, but also to the hollowing out of the civil service that took place over the past decade. It is also in part related to the policy prioritisation of populist projects limited to the election manifesto, an absence of

²³⁸ Stakeholder interviews, World Health Organisation Maldives

²³⁹ Stakeholder interviews, Ministry of Environment

programme and medium-term budgeting and the tensions between political appointees and civil servants. Research shows labor productivity has stagnated and Maldivians are able to perform 90 per cent of productivity from 1995 levels indicating the need for investing in human capital and reorganizing the economic structures to reap the benefit of the demographic dividend.²⁴⁰

Additionally, beyond tourism, there is yet no large-scale effort to develop and finance the private sector, which must become the engine of growth for the dividend. And education is not designed to meet projected workforce needs. It is imperative to invest in building a national skills base for a new, expanded private sector, and also for the policy implementation capacities of the public sector, in all service areas, and also in technical areas such as blue economy, environmental protection and biodiversity (especially with the incentive of keeping high tourist numbers), and research and data management to inform policy. The diverse initiatives of the SAP offer great scope for increasing local employment, but only with major new investments in job skills.

Given the high costs of delivering services to smaller and more remote atolls, Maldives' developmental policies have concentrated on larger islands (chiefly Greater Malé, but also islands in the five other regional centres). There, infrastructure is already present and services can be provided more affordably. Such policies have drawn large numbers of people from smaller islands - to Malé in particular - creating a housing crisis that is acute in the capital city, where almost one-third of the population now lives, together with a large expatriate population. Malé has become the fifth-densest city in the world, with more than 155,000 residents living on less than 2 square kilometres.²⁴¹ Inward migration, mainly for economic opportunities, access to quality education and healthcare has led to issues associated with overcrowding. It has also aggravated the island's social vulnerabilities and increased protection risks, as many unaccompanied young Maldivians migrate to Malé for education purposes at a very young and vulnerable age.

The reclaimed island Hulhumalé, developed in the lagoon of Hulhulé-Farukolhufushi reef where the main international airport is located, was designed with the intention to relieve congestion in Malé, and address serious concerns regarding affordability and quality of housing. In Malé, 61.5 per cent of residents are in rental accommodation, paying on average 53.3 per cent of their household income for housing. The development of new housing on a large scale will address this issue directly. This is of particular significance to young people, as they enter the job market and want to establish a family.

These policies have not been supported by comprehensive studies on the impacts of people's relocations, and investments for appropriate social services. Maldivian culture is based on intimate communities, in which extended families provide mutual support, and living and livelihoods are conducted within the same space. The development of high-rise apartment buildings needs to be accompanied by accommodative measures to build social cohesion and avoid alienation, especially of youth and the elderly. It is perceived that inadequate housing and social services to safeguard young people who migrate for education purposes predisposes them to indulge in drug use, be recruited to gangs and become vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Overall, migration and migrant workers have massively contributed to the Maldivian economy and the labour market has become heavily dependent on international migrants within certain economic sectors and occupations. The tourism sector was initially subject to a limit on the number of foreign nationals it could employ. However, the limit was gradually reversed from a ratio of 55:45 (locals to foreign nationals) to 45:55, and the ratio is not strictly observed by all employers, as they find it difficult to attract local workers for various reasons, for example resorts' isolated locations, the stigma associated with work in resorts, and the lack of soft and hard skills among local jobseekers.

²⁴⁰ National Bureau of Statistics (2020) Future of work in Maldives: National Transfer Accounts

²⁴¹ Ministry of Planning and Infrastructure (2019). National Development Plan 2019-2028 3rd draft. Unpublished

According to employment visa approval records, most foreign construction workers are from Bangladesh, and most teachers and doctors are from India.²⁴² Such reliance on migrant workers has benefited employers in the short-term, as the lower-skilled are employed at low wages and provided very basic accommodation (often at the work site). International migrants also now predominate in fisheries, tailoring and informal sector work traditionally carried out by women, at cheaper costs, displacing women and making them more dependent.

To avoid long-term negative impacts it will be important to review the labour market systems, to include and promote skills and job matching for the local population and to create family friendly workplaces. The low quality of education and gaps in health, physical education, life skills and civic education, along with limited skills for employment pose a number of threats to health and wellbeing of the population. This includes unsafe sexual and reproductive health behaviors and decisions unhealthy dietary and consumption practices and lifestyles, including drug use, poor psychosocial health and emergence of mental health problems. Young women are particularly vulnerable to these health effects. With poor health screening of international migrant workers and limited access to the health system by the international migrant population (due to inadequate local health insurance cover), there is a high risk of preventable morbidity and mortality in this population.²⁴³

The Strategic Action Plan (SAP) emphasizes the interlinkages between environment and the economy:

“Maldives has a narrow economic base, with tourism and tourism related sectors contributing to more than two thirds of GDP. As a result, the economy is highly vulnerable to world travel patterns, as demonstrated by the economic slowdown owing to the international financial crisis of 2008. The 2004 tsunami also demonstrated the vulnerability of the country to natural disasters, along with climate related events that affected most of Maldives’ coral resource in 2016. Maldives is heavily dependent on imports for sustenance and livelihoods. Access to finance and capital markets, and suboptimal administrative and legal systems affect investment and trade potential.”²⁴⁴

The environmental effects of climate change and development pose a high risk to sustained economic growth given the high reliance on tourism. The tourism industry depends on a pristine environment and the conservation of coastal and marine resources, as well as social stability.²⁴⁵ While the beach is the most commonly cited reason for tourist arrivals to Maldives, the beaches are highly dynamic and beach erosion is one of the most significant challenges faced by islands.

Economic growth also leads to increased consumption and resource use, habitat destruction for infrastructure development and increased pollution. The tourism sector is responsible for a large amount of electricity use, transport use and waste generation within the country.²⁴⁶ Increased consumption and imbalances in the ecosystem lead to public health issues such as increased vector borne diseases, cancers and birth defects related to environmental pollution. Environmental degradation creates increased risk of natural disasters and a reduced ability to mitigate their effects at island level. Nevertheless, economic growth and associated revenue increases are essential to generate greater opportunities to adopt more sustainable planning and development measures, to minimise the degradation of the environment, and develop a circular economy and a healthy population.

²⁴² Plewa P (2019). Migration in Maldives: A country Profile, International Organisation for Migration.

²⁴³ Among the cases of Hepatitis B and Tuberculosis reported by Health Protection Agency between 2014 and 2016, most cases were among international migrant workers.

²⁴⁴ SAP, op cit., page 84

²⁴⁵ Ministry of Tourism (2013). Fourth tourism master plan 2013-2017

²⁴⁶ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016.

Chapter 2. National vision for sustainable development

Key development priorities and needs of the Maldives

Figure 8: 5 focus areas of Strategic Action Plan



The Maldives' development agenda is guided by the government's five-year Strategic Action Plan (2019-2023). The SAP outlines the governments' priorities and targets for its term as the executive. The President's note to the SAP makes clear that it provides both a comprehensive and accessible outline of the administration's intended development agenda for the next five years, and also holds government accountable to citizens by making clear what its deliverables are and when results can be expected.²⁴⁷ As such, the SAP consolidates the manifesto pledges of the coalition political parties with existing priorities. It contains a powerful and comprehensive description of the administration's goals.

The SAP does not provide a long-term vision for national development. It was not developed through a planning exercise. It is not aligned to the SDGs, nor linked to its targets. However, it does include the priority actions for attainment of the SDGs to which Maldives is committed. The SAP is the key document that currently guides resource allocation from budget and development assistance. The Government has committed to broad public finance reforms to better monitor and track the impact of public service investments.

The SAP is positioned around 5 themes with 33 subsector policies and related actions, namely: Blue Economy, Caring State, Dignified Families, Jazeera Dhiriulhun (Island Life) and Good Governance.

The Blue Economy

The Government asserts that the economic priorities of the SAP derive from a clear understanding of the central role of the ocean: "The economy and well-being of the Maldives is tied to the health and wealth of the natural environment, primarily the ocean. The largest contributors to the economy, tourism and fisheries sectors are highly dependent on the wellbeing of the ocean, coral reefs, beaches and marine life." The sector consists of six subsectors; fisheries & marine resources, agriculture, tourism, small and medium enterprise development (SME), labour, employment & migration, and economic diversification.

The Caring State

Maldives is in the high human development category. Despite these gains, the SAP recognizes that inequalities in the Maldives continue to grow, especially in the provision of essential services, quality of education and healthcare, social protection, and access to basic infrastructure. Addressing these inequalities as recommended in the Human Development Report 2014, requires "innovative financing and service provisioning options, capacity building, and management".

²⁴⁷ Government of Maldives (2019). Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023

The focus of the “Caring State” is analogous to the development of a rights-based approach to the relationship between public duty-bearers and citizen rights-holders. The SAP gives priority to policies that are critical to bridge the growing income and wealth inequality in the country, exacerbated by geography. Priorities aim to narrow the income and wealth gap and address root causes of such inequalities such as providing avenues of childcare and flexible working hours to increase women’s employment and introducing a minimum wage. While state expenditures on healthcare, education, higher education, social protection are relatively high, to address growing socio-economic problems in the country the sector needs immediate reforms. This needs to be coupled with increased fiscal space to make meaningful investments in developing a skilled social service and social protection workforce with the adequate financial resources to reach the most vulnerable families and children. With a recognition of the endemic substance abuse problem, which results in rampant violence against women and abuse and neglect of children, the government must also invest in better prevention and rehabilitation systems.

The Caring State has five subsectors; health; education; higher education; social protection; and prevention of narcotic abuse and drug rehabilitation.

Dignified families

The rapid transformation and urbanization of the country has created social strains. The Government gives the strengthening of the family a first-order priority, as the foundation of Maldivian society. Addressing key issues affecting family life, particularly gender equality and women’s empowerment will help improve quality of life and thereby the overall development of the country. As the SAP explains:

“Policies focusing on strengthening family ties and addressing socio-economic issues are a recurring theme in all sectoral policies. The government views that a special focus on building stronger families is central to addressing issues relating to domestic violence, child protection and youth vulnerabilities. Creating an enabling environment for families through provision of affordable housing schemes will help build stronger and resilient families. Growing problems of sexual abuse of children, domestic/gender based violence, substance abuse among young people, school dropout rates, mental health, and an ageing adult population are issues that can be addressed through the family.”²⁴⁸

It must be noted that the changing family structure in Maldivian society and wider socio-economic determinants need to be considered in addressing quality of life. Efforts to emphasize stronger, empowered and resilient ‘individuals’- as much as families, to equip rights holders especially those who have tended to be more vulnerable to abuse, and/or exploitation- women, children and youth and persons of different gender identities and/or sexual orientation as well as persons with disabilities could yield good results.

This sector has six subsectors; family; housing; youth; community empowerment; sports; and Islamic faith.

Jazeeraa Dhiriulhun (island life)

The term conceives a development model based on citizen engagement, inclusivity, and sustainability, living in harmony with the island environment. Citizens’ livelihoods, cultural identity and well-being are to be derived sustainably through connectivity and management of natural resources. Citizen voice and agency is a fundamental aspect of the concept. The sector has six subsectors: decentralization, a national transport network, environmental protection and preservation, clean energy, waste as a resource, water and sanitation, resilient communities, information, communication and technology, and arts, culture, and heritage.

²⁴⁸ SAP, op. cit., page 185

Good Governance

The Maldives' successful development has enabled progress from low human development to a high human development ranking, including the introduction of democracy. As the SAP states, the country's efforts to consolidate democracy have been challenging. The 2008 Constitution introduced a separation of state powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary, multiparty elections, establishment of independent institutions, decentralized governance, and a comprehensive Bill of rights and freedoms for citizens.

In the view of the Government, the current requirements of the democratic transition in the Maldives are to "strengthen the independence and capacities of state institutions to design and implement policies as well as deliver services that spur human development." It is also an opportunity to implement policies to increase transparency, accountability and regularize Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Council elections. The sector has seven subsectors: rule of law & judicial reform; national security & public safety; eliminating corruption; an accountable state; independent institutions & public service reform; gender equality; and foreign affairs.

National Planning

Expected to be approved imminently, the long-term National Spatial Plan 2020-2040 (NSP) that outlines the strategies for infrastructure development required for the country to achieve SAP goals. The Maldives NSP is a plan for spatial realization of the core SAP policy of decentralising development, creating growth poles and service centres in the regions, and shifting development pressures away from Greater Malé. As such it is proposed to develop a total of 21 NSP Regions including; the Central Region, an additional 14 Urban Regions and 6 Satellite Regions.²⁴⁹ The NSP broadly integrates the national and international commitments of the country and will especially support the timely delivery of the SAP, and progress towards the SDGs.

The NSP takes into account the unique atoll geography and island environment of Maldives and lays out a vision that seeks to break from current ad-hoc and centralized development efforts; bring about a more equitable distribution of development benefits across the nation; optimize use of resources; and harmonize social, economic and environmental development efforts. A key aspect of the NSP is the creation of a National Transportation Network (NTN) as the foundation of the plan, which is also consistent with the SAP. There is room to ensure the greater inclusion of migration (both internal and international), environment and climate change in the continued development of the NSP given the significant impacts these elements have on spatial planning both now and in the future.

In addition to these comprehensive national plans, there are several sector specific long-terms plans, including for education, health, energy, waste management, water and sanitation and fisheries. These have all integrated Agenda 2030 towards achievement of the SDGs.

The Voluntary National Review (VNR) report of the Maldives (2017) catalogued new policies and plans that directly incorporate SDGs, through a national exercise carried out to map the existing sectoral policies, plans and laws to SDG targets. The VNR indicated the existence of some form of sectoral policy or plan for most of the SDG targets. This includes (for instance) the National Food Safety Policy developed by the Ministry of Health in line with SDG 2. The Health Master Plan 2016-2025 and Education Sector Plan 2019-2023 are other plans aligned to the SDGs and the Agenda 2030 framework.^{250,251} The Local Government Authority has aligned its five year Development Plan (2017-2021) with the SDGs, which will be implemented by the newly empowered Island Councils. Other SDG target areas include health, poverty, gender equality, water and sanitation, responsible consumption and production and climate action.²⁵²

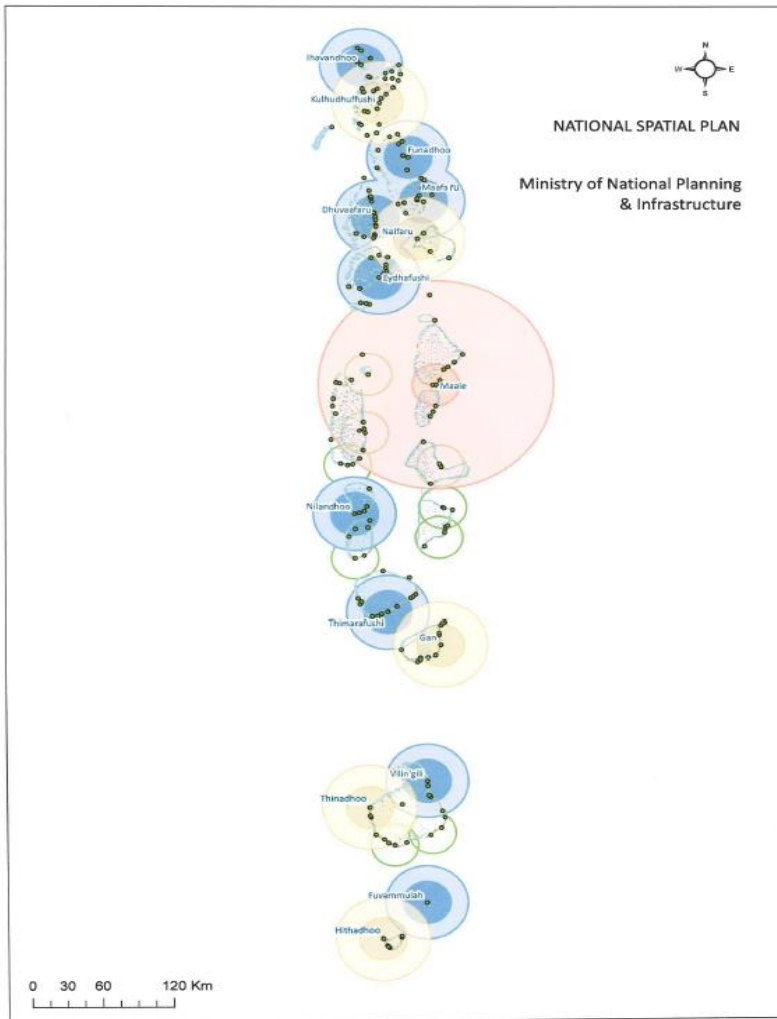
²⁴⁹ Ministry of National Planning and Infrastructure (2019). Maldives National Spatial Plan 2020-2040.

²⁵⁰ Ministry of Health (2016). Health Master Plan 2016-2025.

²⁵¹ Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education (2019). Education Sector Plan

²⁵² Sobir R (2017). Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) to assess the Maldives readiness to implement the SDGs. Ministry of Environment and Energy and UNDP.

Figure 9: Proposed development hubs



The Maldives Energy Policy and Strategy 2016 is the key policy document guiding the development of the energy sector in the Maldives, and is aligned with SDG 7. The objectives of the policy include promoting energy conservation and efficiency, increasing the share of renewable energy in the national energy mix, and improving the reliability and sustainability of electricity while increasing national energy security.²⁵³

The sustainable and sound management of waste poses as a significant challenge in terms of protecting human health and the environment. The National Waste Management Policy, which was introduced in 2015, recognises these challenges and is geared towards institutionalising appropriate, environmentally sound, and commercially viable and sustainable models for waste management in the country. A legal framework is being considered to reduce plastic pollution - that will contribute to the realisation of SDG 14 through reduction of marine

pollution, in particular from land-based activities. The Maldives is also implementing an Integrated Water Resource Management approach towards the provision of sustained sources of safe drinking water.

While there is no specific reference to the SDGs, the Maldives engages with regional and international partners in making fisheries in the Indian Ocean more sustainable. The Maldives has been closely collaborating with the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, by providing data and other necessary information to protect the marine environment as well as supporting the elimination of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fisheries in the region. These activities have significance for Goal 14.²⁵⁴

Maldives Immigration has introduced its Strategic Plan 2020 – 2024 in November 2020. This Plan specifically mentions the development of an integrated border management strategy, which is crucial to promote safe, orderly and humane migration for all.²⁵⁵ The Plan’s migration management goals include developing an anti-human trafficking and anti-people smuggling framework, implementing regular migration channels, and strengthening law enforcement to curb irregular migrant flows.

²⁵³ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

²⁵⁴ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

²⁵⁵ <https://immigration.gov.mv/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Strategic-Plan-2020-2024.pdf>

The relationship between economic, social, and environmental dimensions in the national vision for sustainable development, human rights, and peace

Policies and strategic actions envisioned across the economic, social, and environmental dimensions in the national vision for sustainable development reflected in the SAP have wider implications for the human rights and peace dimensions of the SDGs. The SAP envisions a prosperous society based on the wealth of the natural environment, primarily the ocean, as economic activities in Maldives are highly dependent on the wellbeing of the ocean, coral reefs, beaches, and marine life²⁵⁶. The policies under ‘Jazeera Dhiriulhun’ are cross cutting across a number of subsectors and relate to decentralized governance, protection of the environment and establishment of a national transport network and development of regional hubs, expected to improve access to social services and economic activity.

The ideology behind ‘Jazeera Dhiriulhun’ centres around living in harmony with the island environment, where citizen’s livelihoods, economies, cultural identity, and well-being are derived sustainably.²⁵⁷ However, SAP priorities are heavy on infrastructure development and aspects of human resource development for the proposed services do not appear to be sufficiently prioritized nor budgeted. For instance, the SAP policy on free education for undergraduate degrees is not particularly mapped to the human resource requirements for the proposed transport network, digital network or to the social infrastructure proposed for the regional hubs. This raises questions of sustainability and feasibility towards achievement of SDG targets.

Peace and human rights are central to both the ‘Jazeera Dhiriulhun’ vision for island communities, and the elaborated priorities under the Good Governance sector. The Government is strongly committed to the twin priorities of democratic consolidation through justice, human rights and accountable institutions, and policies that meet international standards, and a decentralization that gives voice, participation and inclusion to island communities, women and youth.

²⁵⁶ Government of Maldives (2019). Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023.

²⁵⁷ *ibid*

Chapter 3. Country progress towards the 2030 Agenda²⁵⁸

Progress towards Agenda 2030 and achievement of the SDGs must ultimately be tracked comprehensively using nationally prioritised goals and targets. As this work remains to be done in the Maldives, it is not currently possible to report progress at these levels. However, recognizing that this CCA is a living document, progress towards Agenda 2030 is reported with currently available information based on the five Ps.

Under ‘**Prosperity**’ targets, Maldives promotes an open economy, and the economy has continued to grow despite the political turbulence and governance challenges of the last decade. Maldives is expanding and rapidly diversifying its sources of tourists, further increasing high-end resorts on tourist islands while expanding numbers of guest houses on inhabited islands. Guesthouses, being on inhabited islands, can provide more jobs for island inhabitants than resorts, which employ largely international migrant workers. And dependence on high-end resort tourism remains. Construction, the other major growth area of the economy, is also a sector which largely employs international migrant workers. Thus, progress on decent work has been slower than expected, with reductions in unemployment not tracking economic growth.

The proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET) is high at 23 per cent (and much higher for women than men). Meanwhile the migrant labor force has increased. The challenge is to provide young people with necessary skills for the job market through revised curricula in the public education system and to redirect current expectations for white collar and government jobs, toward skilled trades and private sector work. Although unemployment is higher in Malé than the Atolls, poverty levels in the Atolls are higher. To address poverty and break the cycle of the migration of unskilled youth to Malé the government’s central focus is on decentralization, and the development of transport, services, self-government and increasing opportunities for economic activity in the Atolls. However, the country is under significant debt and the growth trajectory of the economy is largely dependent on continued external financing and tourism numbers that are subject to shocks. Women especially in the informal sector are hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

An analysis across the indicators suggest that much progress has been achieved in the ‘**People**’ targets. These include targets on poverty, and major health and education targets. Income poverty levels stood at 6.6 per cent in 2016 using the internal poverty line of \$1.25 (MVR70)²⁵⁹ while in 2009-10 (using a different methodology) poverty levels were assessed to be at 15 per cent. In Malé, 1.5 per cent of the population lives below the \$1.25 poverty line while 10.4 per cent of the population in the atolls lives below that poverty line. In this regard, the focus needs to be on minimizing the urban-rural gap in the quality of service provision and tracking poverty.²⁶⁰

Maternal, child and neonatal mortality rates continued to decrease while childhood nutrition indicators improved²⁶¹ and out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure decreased from 49 in 2011 to 29 per cent in 2016.²⁶² Further reductions in neonatal mortality and maternal mortality can be achieved only with further investments and capacity for caring for premature births and addressing birth defect prevention through interventions such folic acid supplementation for reproductive aged women, early detection and management through a comprehensive life cycle approach. Policies and practices related to nutrition and dietary habits, tobacco and drug use, and sedentary lifestyles poses major challenges towards achieving health targets related to NCDs.

Education targets shows similar improvements; all children are now guaranteed 14 years of free education from pre-primary through first degree. This includes a 10-year compulsory cycle from grades 1 to 10. Ninety-three per cent of children (both sexes) are in pre-primary learning before official primary school age and the

²⁵⁸ In the absence of a national strategy mapping to the SDGs, this section is based on a sample review of key indicators against available data. The draft National Development Plan, when adopted, will provide a basis for a comprehensive assessment.

²⁵⁹ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Analytical Report IV: Poverty & Inequality

²⁶⁰ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

²⁶¹ Ministry of Health (2017). Health SDG profile.

²⁶² Ministry of Health (2019). National Health Accounts 2015-2017

total net enrolment ratio in primary education stands at 99 per cent (both sexes). The challenges with regard to education relate to quality, low levels of functional literacy and learning outcomes, improving life skills, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive behavior, inculcating civic responsibility and volunteerism through education, and increasing enrolment in higher secondary education.²⁶³

Gender equality is low across all targets. Women experiencing gender-based violence is high, with one in four women experiencing some form of violence by their current or most recent husband/partner.²⁶⁴ The labour force participation rate is low among women, which is the result of cultural norms and the higher burden of unpaid care work for family members, which restrict their time to engage in formal and higher paying economic activities, enhance their education and training and participate in the public sphere. Women in managerial positions are low (at 19.5 per cent)²⁶⁵ and they earn 20 per cent less than men.²⁶⁶ Across the country, women have significantly less assets and financial capacity than men, to be used as collateral to obtain bank loans for small and medium enterprises.²⁶⁷ Women's engagement in politics and other leadership activities is limited. In the 2019 parliamentary election, while 33 women contested for parliament, only four women won, and the number of women in parliament declined from 5 to 4.

The existence of nutrition challenges, low secondary and higher school enrolment rates and high unemployment and NEET rates in a country with upper-middle income status is alarming and signals an urgent need for a major, comprehensive new focus on human resources capacity development, and effectiveness of the governance system and institutions. While several targets call for disaggregated data there is a huge gap in the national data system to track vulnerable groups.

While some of the '**planet**' targets appear to be partially on track, data gaps limit the possibility of conducting a sound assessment of the progress that has been made. Access to improved water and sanitation has improved, with 98 per cent of the population with access to safely managed drinking water and sanitation facilities.²⁶⁸ However, waste management, energy and emission targets remain problematic, especially with the expansion of tourism and urbanisation. Efforts are underway to diversify the energy sector through introduction and promotion of renewable energy sources, with the target to replace up to 30 per cent of daytime peak load of electricity with these sources. Electricity, vehicles and waste management have been identified as the main sources of GHG emissions and while there are initiatives on energy production and waste management, there are no policy initiatives on reducing emissions from vehicles.²⁶⁹

With 80 per cent of land being less than 1 meter above sea level, and with 42 per cent of the population and more than 70 per cent of critical infrastructure within 100 meters of the shorelines, climate change and extreme weather events are a pressing and potentially existential threat. In 2016 alone over 45 islands faced water shortages due to significant changes to weather patterns, including the hottest dry season recorded in 18 years. The warm temperature due to El Nino resulted in more than 60 per cent of coral reefs bleaching,²⁷⁰ which adversely impacts underwater life and natural resources vital for the economy and livelihoods.

Information is limited and data is not available on the indicators of Goals 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, making it difficult to assess progress made. The overall lack of data for the environmental dimension of the SDGs is particularly evident in relation to monitoring emissions and air quality, spatial data, waste, energy and the water sector, with a strong need to strengthen mechanisms to collect, process, analyze and manage data and statistics related to these sectors.

²⁶³Ministry of Education (2019). Education Sector Analysis

²⁶⁴ Ministry of Health & ICF. Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/17

²⁶⁵ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Analytical Report III: Employment

²⁶⁶ National Bureau of Statistics (2019). Population and development in Maldives 2019. ICDP25+.

²⁶⁷ ADB (2014). Maldives Gender Equality Diagnostic of Selected Sectors

²⁶⁸ Ministry of Health & ICF (2019) Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017

²⁶⁹ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). State of the Environment 2016

²⁷⁰ *ibid*

Progress on promoting peaceful and just societies related to the ‘Peace’ targets is mixed, due to the country’s continued political instability. There is limited national data but progress on governance can be assessed with the international governance indicators discussed in Chapter 1. The VNR points to the legislative changes made to improve access to information and the criminal code,²⁷¹ which has since been enacted along with several judicial reforms that are currently underway.

Progress has been made in relation to domestic violence including violence against children and gender-based violence, with enactment of appropriate laws. However, a number of serious challenges exist with regard to awareness and implementation of these laws and providing protective services for victims. Widely accepted social norms that promote violent behaviors still exist.

The key challenge to achieving sustained progress in peace and justice targets is also related to the recent history of polarized politics - which has worsened already limited trust in institutions and created a high turnover of staff in the institutions and in the civil service generally. The loss of experienced senior staff is especially devastating in a small island nation, further limiting the national capacity to contribute to agenda 2030 across the SDGs.

Under ‘partnerships’ targets, progress is slow without a national vision that aligns with the SDGs. Sectors work in silos and partners are not coordinated in a comprehensive manner. Further improvement is needed for adopting a ‘whole-government’ approach, building capacity within sectors on planning and strategizing, data management and statistical capacity.^{272,273} The localization of the SDGs has not progressed, and a number of data gaps exist, even though 80 per cent of the data is expected to be available to be drawn from administrative systems. The limitations on the utility of the existing data systems and data management capacities are areas that need prioritisation.

Furthermore, coordination mechanisms do not have the participation of the Parliament and Judiciary that is critical for SDG 16 and a number of other SDGs.²⁷⁴ This is noted in the VNR with a commitment to continue work on integration of SDGs into the national plans, to help prioritize SDGs and build strong coordination and cross sectoral collaboration between the government agencies, development partners, local governments and commitment by the private sector as well as civil society.²⁷⁵ The implementation of Agenda 2030 also requires continued political support and commitment as well as broad based participation, as these will be critical to drive the national sustainable development agenda forward.

Importance of infrastructure to the achievement of SDGs

The importance of infrastructure to the achievement of the SDGs is magnified by the fact that 92 per cent of all SDG targets revolve around infrastructure. This is because infrastructure is critical to service provision, employment and reducing inequalities that ultimately contribute to the alleviation of poverty. An apt example in the Maldivian context is the achievement of SDG 14: Life below water. Maldives’ marine resources are essential to its social and economic development and health as it provides a valuable source of livelihood and subsistence from fisheries and tourism. However, these marine resources are prone to the impacts of climate change and pollution. Therefore, addressing such problems will require intervention across multiple infrastructure sectors: connecting communities to wastewater treatment plants to prevent untreated discharge in waterways; providing adequate solid waste and recycling facilities to eliminate the emission of plastics and other wastes; incorporating coastal erosion in flood risk management plans; and regulating marine transport and contamination from fuels which are a major source of marine pollution.

²⁷¹ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

²⁷² Auditor General’s Office (2019). Performance audit of preparedness for implementation of sustainable development goals

²⁷³ Sobir R (2017). Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) to assess the Maldives readiness to implement the SDGs. Ministry of Environment Energy & UNDP

²⁷⁴ Auditor General’s Office (2019). Performance audit of preparedness for implementation of sustainable development goals

²⁷⁵ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Voluntary National Review for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017

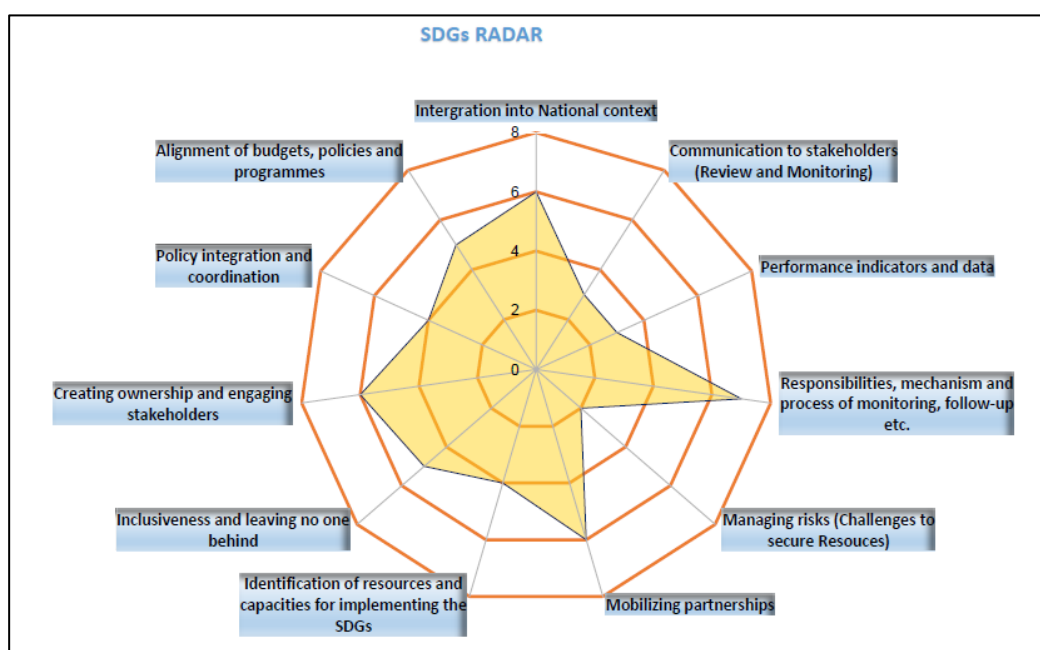
Given the influence that infrastructure has on the achievement of the SDGs, it is imperative that the Maldivian Government embed sustainability and resilience considerations into infrastructure decisions that identifies and prioritizes infrastructure. This is possible through a systems-of-systems approach to the planning and prioritization of infrastructure that goes beyond seeing infrastructure as physical assets that function in silos, to recognizing the inherent interdependencies between networked and non-networked infrastructure. For example, networked infrastructure systems like water, energy, transportation, and waste management are critical for the smooth functioning of non-networked systems – comprised of single assets, buildings or facilities that deliver a service to a community (e.g. hospitals, schools, community centres).²⁷⁶

The importance of such an approach is more magnified considering the high cost and long-term nature of mega infrastructure projects and that such, unless diligently planned and prioritized based on evidence, can be to the detriment of the Maldivian people. As a SIDS, this situation is exacerbated through the stresses caused by rapid urbanization, changes in demographics and climate change.²⁷⁷

The status and progress of SDG nationalization and localization

Maldives is behind schedule on the proposal in the 2017 Voluntary National Review (VNR) which it presented to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), to identify resources and capacities to implement the 2030 Agenda and put in place a risk management process for implementation. Much of the work aimed at preparation for implementation, such as putting in place an effective monitoring, follow up, review and reporting process, is either at an early stage of implementation or is being planned.

Figure 10: Progress towards identifying resources and capacities



Institutional arrangements: With regard to the adaptation of Agenda 2030 into its national context, the Government has made substantial progress in setting up governance and institutional arrangements, with a National Ministerial Coordination Committee (NMCC) and an SDG division at the Ministry of National Planning and Infrastructure (MNPI) supported by a Technical Committee. While key stakeholders are represented in the Technical Committee to provide technical input to the process of preparedness for implementation, there is no representative from Parliament which is one of the custodian agencies under goal 16.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Thacker S, Adshead D, Morgan G, Crosskey S, Bajpai A, Ceppi P, Hall JW & O'Regan N. Infrastructure: Underpinning Sustainable Development. UNOPS,

²⁷⁷ ibid

²⁷⁸ Auditor General's Office (2019). Performance audit of preparedness for implementation of sustainable development goals

Several challenges exist for these bodies to function: a lack of interest, participation and accountability within line ministries to support the SDG coordination process, and limited understanding amongst government officials of how the SDGs fit in the government's mandate and operation.²⁷⁹ While effective coordination is critical to adequately prepare for the implementation of the SDGs, there is a culture of line ministries and government agencies working in silos which could impede the progress towards implementation.

Policy alignment: The mapping of SDGs with the government's SAP has recently been completed. SDGs are reflected in sectoral policies and plans and are being integrated in newly developed plans. The absence of a long-term national development plan remains a key challenge for policy alignment with the SDGs. Maldives has thus far not prepared an SDG financing strategy, which negatively impacts its ability to mobilize both internal and external resources to fund critical areas that are lagging behind on specific SDG targets and indicators. The SAP is the basis for resource mobilisation and prioritisation, though not aligned or mapped to the SDGs. There is a lack of clarity regarding ownership of and accountability for SDGs, potentially arising from lack of coordination and communication among some line ministries and agencies.²⁸⁰ With limited coordination among agencies, policies are developed in siloes that does not take into consideration the policy implications that one sectoral policy may have on the rest. Designations of accountable lead agencies and co-lead agencies and their endorsement by the NMCC or an oversight body determined by the government would improve ownership and accountability among various agencies involved in the SDG process.

Human resources capacity: Although the SDG Division is in place, there is a need for strengthening their facilitation skills for SDG based dialogues and planning exercises, data and analytical skills for SDG reporting budgeting processes and analyses. In addition, weaknesses in institutional setup and capacity to gather and consolidate sectorial data needs to be addressed. There is no gap analysis carried out by any state agency or a line ministry to identify the resources and capacities required for the implementation of SDGs. Lack of a gap analysis could lead to inefficiencies in resource allocation throughout the implementation process. To overcome this in the long run, it has been recommended to emphasise building the necessary capacity within the MNPI and focus on capacity within sectors; and planning and strategizing, data management and statistical capacity²⁸¹ (including gender statistics and analytical capacity)

Data and monitoring: Significant progress has been made under the leadership of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) to map the existing data availability against SDG indicators and to organize existing baseline information against the indicators. The Maldives prepared its first Voluntary National Review report in 2017, but the report lacks comprehensive information and analysis on the status of the Maldives' performance against SDGs. Data gaps including disaggregated data, including by disability, are especially evident for the social and environmental dimensions of the SDGs.

Some of the challenges to data and SDG based monitoring include bridging data gaps and limited capacity of line ministries in data extraction, analysis, and reporting processes. These challenges are exacerbated by the limited reliance on evidence for national and local-level planning and policies. The Government has communicated its plans to prepare a data quality assurance framework and design a process for monitoring, follow up, review and reporting in its 2017 VNR. However, these plans, including localisation of the SDGs have not materialised as envisaged in the VNR. The SDG division, in cooperation with NBS, has initiated the preparation of a data quality assurance framework.²⁸²

The Government has not yet developed guidelines to monitor the baselines and milestones of monitoring, follow-up, review, and reporting. In addition, gathering the necessary data has been a massive challenge since most entities do not possess information systems to generate data and there is a lack of willingness to share

²⁷⁹ Sobir R (2017). Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) to assess Maldives readiness to implement the SDGs. Ministry of Environment and Energy & UNDP Auditor General's Office (2019). Performance audit of preparedness for implementation of sustainable development goals.

²⁸¹ *ibid*

²⁸² *ibid*

administrative data with NBS on a regular basis. There is a weak evidence analysis and utilization culture in the Maldives, and most available analyses are based on surveys or census data, posing significant challenges to adequate planning and policy making to meet the emerging demands and needs of the country.

Financing: The Government has not identified nor secured the resources and capacities (means of implementation) needed to implement the 2030 Agenda.²⁸³ The rapid integrated assessment looked at the budgeting process and identified entry points to integrate and prioritize SDGs including the development of a screening criterion for medium term budgets known as ‘new policy initiatives’ (NPI) and to conduct SDG based budget analyses using the newly adopted functional budget classification of the government.

Some of the challenges in budgeting include the reliance on external/donor funding for some sectors and the challenges related to internal budget prioritization practices.²⁸⁴ The capacity of the Ministries and Parliament to prepare, scrutinize, and criticise national budgets is weak and since budgets are prepared on a line item basis it is difficult to critique the budget in a meaningful way. The efforts made to identify the gaps in available, prospective and secured resources, and innovative methods like mobilised partnerships planned or used to secure resources and capacities, indicate that the sectors lack resources and capacity required to identify the challenges in securing resources.

COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on the Maldives’ economy and fiscal reserves. Together with the UN, the Government has launched an Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF). The INFF will play an important role in bringing together the SDG policy and priorities with financing initiatives in a holistic and systematic manner across Government. A public awareness campaign about the SDGs needs to be rolled out across the country, in line with mobilizing support for the reinvigoration of a longer-term national planning agenda.

EXAMPLE OF IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDGS²⁸⁵

The impact of COVID-19 threatens to reverse years of development and set back significant achievements made by the Maldives in attaining the SDGs.²⁸⁶

SDG 1: There is increased likelihood of reversing progress made (from 2006-2017) towards eliminating poverty. Almost one third of the total population remain multi-dimensionally poor (28 per cent of the total population). With 34 per cent of children aged 17 years or younger living in a poor household, children are more likely to be poor than any other age group.

Initial reports show that 22,000 payroll workers from tourism establishments have been adversely impacted directly from COVID-19.²⁸⁷ However, the true impact on livelihoods, particularly the vulnerable, remains to be determined. The HIES 2016 shows that over 40 per cent of informal workers are women, and are more likely to face disproportionate impacts, especially in the absence of a strong social protection net. There is high possibility of people backsliding into poverty or create new groups of poor people.

SDG 5: Early evidence suggests women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Women are more likely to bear responsibilities on household chores, childcare and take on additional burdens of disinfecting groceries and household items and facilitating home based learning of younger children. This will further constrict time for women to engage in economic and productive work or tend to their physical and mental well-being. The pandemic has also seen increasing domestic violence. In a recent survey, 17 per cent of

²⁸³ *ibid*

²⁸⁴ Ministry of Environment and Energy (2017). Maldives’ Voluntary National Review for the HLPF on Sustainable Development 2017

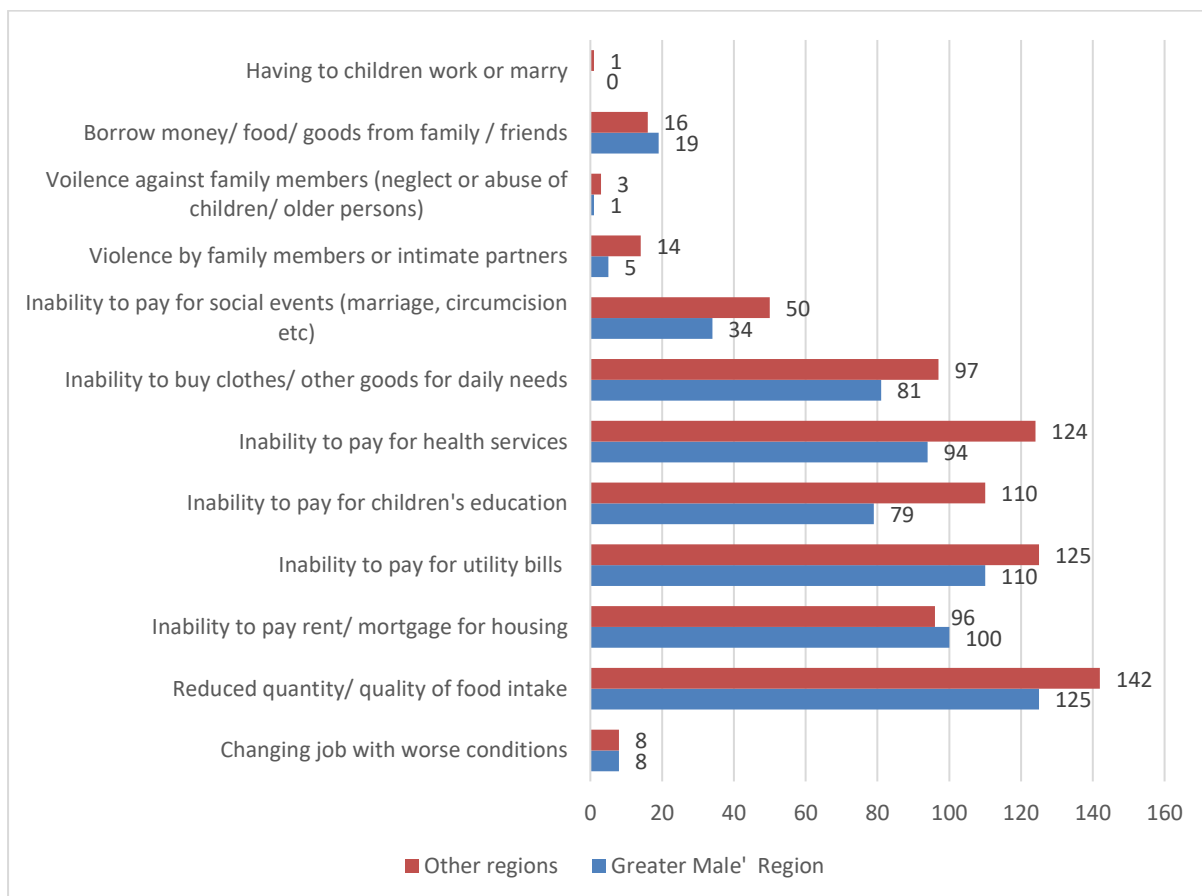
²⁸⁵ As the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing at the time of writing – December 2020 - it is too early to provide a reliable assessment and comprehensive analysis of its impact on the country.

²⁸⁶ Recent mapping exercise (unpublished) of the SDGs against the Government’s SAP conducted by UNDP.

²⁸⁷ Ministry of Economic Development & UNDP 2020

respondents reported having ‘serious concerns’ about domestic violence. One of six of these respondents reported knowing cases of domestic violence that happened within the week of reporting.

Unlike unregistered employees in the formal or informal sector, women in the informal sector engaged in income generating livelihood activities, home-based work and agriculture were more severely affected. Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) said they lost their income altogether while for 62 per cent of respondents, their income was highly impacted.²⁸⁸



Impact on various aspects of daily life for women in the informal sector due to the Covid-19 crisis.

For most respondents, the greatest impact on life due was in having to reduce the quantity or lower the quality of food intake. Inability to pay utility bills, health services and to pay for clothes and daily needs were among the most frequently mentioned consequences of the loss of income by women in the informal sector.

SDG 10: COVID-19 has created new forms of inequality. Disparities exist between knowledge and manual workers, between people and businesses who can easily shift to working remotely, and those frontline workers. New forms of inequality exist in access to technology, or affordability of internet which is a prerequisite to access basic services. While it is recognized that such inequalities would have a high impact on vulnerable groups (such as women, children, PWDs, migrant workers, youth), it must be recognized that different groups will have differentiated impacts, and there will be some individuals within a homogenous group that are more vulnerable than others.

²⁸⁸ Gendered Impact of Covid 19: Study on Maldives relief/stimulus packages and inclusion of women in the informal sector, 2020.

Chapter 4: Leaving No-one Behind

Rapid economic growth, changing rural and urban dynamics, the high rate of internal migration to Malé and the high rate of growth of the greater Malé area, as well as political and social change has produced major social dislocation, disparities in access to services, increased inequalities and vulnerabilities, and uneven development overall. These changes have reinforced divisions and produced major issues. These touch everyone in Maldives, especially affecting many women, children, youth, migrants (internal and international), people in the atolls and those with special needs.

Challenges are widespread for women, children and youth and persons with disabilities. Over a quarter of women are either unemployed or not looking for a job. Youth unemployment is at 8 per cent. The government is the top employer among Maldivians. Tourism and construction, the main drivers of growth, rely mostly on foreign labour and male employment. About two thirds of Maldivians are employed in jobs not related to tourism, suggesting a misalignment between the drivers of growth and aspirations of jobseekers.

The SAP is focused on addressing issues faced by these and other vulnerable groups in society in a holistic manner. However, the social dynamics creating social pathology and exclusion are strong. Concerted efforts are required to assure that those at risk are not left behind.

Women

Maldivian society has traditionally followed a uniquely moderate form of Islam and civil laws have been described as embodying a 'gender egalitarian nature'.²⁸⁹ Gender disparities in enrolment rates from pre-primary to secondary school are significantly less evident than in the majority of other countries in the region.

Dramatic changes to the Maldivian social fabric are challenging this equilibrium.²⁹⁰ During the last four decades the tourism industry has increased exponentially and has brought foreign influences on the country. At the same time, there has been a concerted propagation of conservative religious views. There have been high levels of labor migration from other countries in the region, including from other Islamic nations.

These and other stresses of very rapid change have increased the prevalence of conservative Islam. It has been suggested that this period of rapid industrialisation, globalisation and social change has served to unbalance the moderate island life that has existed for so long in the Maldives and has contributed to conservatism and increasingly negative perspectives about women's rights in the country.²⁹¹

Growing gender inequality, increasing unemployment rates among women and growing signs of negative attitudes towards gender equality are serious risks. Advances in gender equality have faced a dramatic backlash in recent years, observed in the recent human rights study of 2019 that showed a drastic decline in those who thought women should have equal rights in the family to only 7.4 per cent (from 74.1 per cent in 2011 and 85.4 per cent in 2005).²⁹² A similar decline was observed by gender. In 2011, 80.7 per cent of women believed that women should have equal rights within the family. This collapsed to a drastically low level of 3.1 per cent in 2019. While more men believe in equal rights for women in the family (14.9 per cent), this is also a huge decline, from 67.3 per cent in 2011. Young people (aged 20-29) displayed low support for the idea that women should have equal rights, with 9.7 per cent strongly agreeing or agreeing with the assertion.

²⁸⁹ World Bank, *Understanding Gender in the Maldives*, 2016, page 2.

²⁹⁰ Fulu, E. and Miedema, S. Violence Against Women: Globalizing the Integrated Ecological Model, *Violence Against Women* 2015, Vol. 21(12) 1434, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1077801215596244> accessed 22 October 2019

²⁹¹ Fulu, E. and Miedema, S. Violence Against Women: Globalizing the Integrated Ecological Model, *Violence Against Women* 2015, Vol. 21(12) 1434, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1077801215596244> accessed 22 October 2019; El-Horr, J. and Pande, R. *Understanding Gender in the Maldives: Toward Inclusive Development*, World Bank Group, 2016.

²⁹² UNDP & HRCM, The "Rights Side of Life", Third Report, final draft January 2020, page 34.

A HRCM study²⁹³ showed that 11.4 per cent of respondents believed that a husband can hit his wife if she fails to obey him and 52.2 per cent agreed that a wife is duty bound to have sex with her husband even if she is unwilling, with more women (60.3 per cent) supporting this statement than men. Fifty one per cent of respondents agreed that a wife should be submissive to her husband, with those in rural regions (24.3 per cent) significantly higher compared to urban dwellers (9.5 per cent). A 2016-17 study²⁹⁴ reported that 16.7 per cent of women aged 15-19 experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months and 13 per cent had experienced female genital cutting.

Despite these attitudes, MoGFSS statistics show reporting of gender-based violence (GBV) has improved, albeit with fluctuations, with an average of 37 cases reported per month²⁹⁵. In contrast, their 2018 human rights study²⁹⁶ showed that 34.69 per cent of respondents were disappointed with the performance of institutions in response to such issues, while 29.25 per cent reported satisfaction and 17.6 per cent were pleased with the institutions handling of domestic violence cases. The MoGFSS posits that child marriages and other harmful practices may be increasing. In 2018, 3 cases of underage marriage were investigated.²⁹⁷

COVID-19 has seen an increase in reported cases of GBV. A recent study shows that spouses of drug offenders were more at risk to partner violence, suggesting the potential value of strengthening the communication and support systems and reimagine communication channels in the future to be more effective.

Harassment occurs in all realms: on the street, in the workplace and on social media. While the government continues to express its commitment in building a culture of tolerance as a response to extreme ideologies, social media shows an increase in hate speech. Many young women spend a considerable amount of time on social media but are very wary of posting anything personal about themselves for fear of criticism. While on-line abuse, blackmail and bullying is a universal problem, it seems acute in politics in the Maldives, where women already suffer from considerable disadvantages.

Reducing risks that exacerbate violence is critical. A combination of preventative and security measures are included in the National Plan of Action on Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (2020-2025). A study of root causes and drivers for marginalization of young people highlighted a lack of opportunities for higher education, specialized training, and employment available for youth in the Maldives. Corruption, education, drugs, unemployment, housing, gang violence and violent extremism were identified as contributors of social exclusion and dissatisfaction among young people, which affect men and women differently.²⁹⁸ Emerging grievances from vulnerable groups act as precursors for violence. The Government's 'whole of society' approach to tackling violent extremism recognizes the critical potential role for local councils and educators.

The interaction of extremism and gender is highly sensitive. Open debate about religion is limited. Women who speak up in the public arena have experienced to abuse and threats, mostly over social media.

The Maldives is both a destination and a source country for women and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. Children are trafficked from outlying islands to Malé, some of whom are reportedly subjected to sexual abuse and forced labor.²⁹⁹ In 2018, the US State Department downgraded the Maldives on its watch-list for human trafficking, citing its failure to take steps to effectively investigate and combat trafficking. The Maldives has remained on the Tier 2 Watch List for two consecutive years. There are no formal shelter services available to victims of trafficking, creating challenges for protection and prosecution.

²⁹³ Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (October 2018). Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Ministry of Health, Maldives

²⁹⁵ Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, 2019.

<http://gender.gov.mv/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/11/Case-Statistics-Report-Jan-Oct-2018.pdf>

²⁹⁶ Human rights study, Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, 2018.

²⁹⁷ Ibid

²⁹⁸ "Youth Vulnerability Assessment", 2019, UNDP, with the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC)

²⁹⁹ 2020 Trafficking in Persons report Maldives, US State department.

Children

The Maldives is fortunately free of many of the social barriers to children's rights that affect other countries. Access to primary education is universal, literacy almost universal, and there is little gender discrimination in access to primary and lower secondary education. Barriers to birth registration, children accessing education, health services or other essential services for children are primarily geographic. The education sector has seen impressive progress and achievement in the last two decades. Access to public and free education from K-10 is compulsory under the Education Act (2020). Maldives has high enrollment up to end of lower secondary education; 90.5 per cent at lower secondary level (end of grade 10). However, there is an alarmingly sharp drop in transition from lower to higher secondary education with net enrolment at 49.7 per cent (56.7 per cent female and 43.0 per cent male) in 2019.³⁰⁰ This means about 50 per cent of students have no access to higher secondary education. Students who wish to pursue higher secondary education often have to go to Male' or another island that provides higher secondary education. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and violence in their host families and islands, predisposing them to adopting risky behaviours. This is evident in the data on juvenile crimes, particularly adolescent boys engaging in drug use and criminal activities. Difficulty in accessing secondary and higher education results leads to a high drop-out rate. Failure to acquire the necessary skills makes it difficult to access the labour market.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the entire school system, impacting over 91,000 children from pre-primary to higher secondary across the country. The learning loss connected to school closures are estimated to be huge in terms of interrupted learning and unequal access to distance and online learning. The school closing will lead to learning loss, increased dropouts, and higher inequality. The longer children are out of school, greater the impacts on learning and the higher the risks that vulnerable children will not return to schools, and very likely leading to greater disengagement in learning due to introduction of new and unfamiliar modalities of learning. Being out of school places vulnerable children, especially girls at increased risks. These negative impacts will be significantly higher for children with disabilities, from underserved or disadvantaged islands, and from low-income households. Children with disabilities and children in preprimary – primary grades are expected to be impacted more due to school closures as absence of in-person interaction with teachers, absence of physical activities and extracurricular activities causes disinterest in learning. Learning loss coupled with disengagement from learning, especially at the secondary level is expected to increase the number of adolescents out of school, which was an emerging issue identified in the Education Sector Analysis of 2019. While school closures have compelled the schools to explore online and distance learning modalities with modest success, formidable challenges exist in ensuring equity and quality of distance learning.

In 2019, a new school was opened in the capital with ramps that allow PWDs to access the whole school premises. Removing obstacles to ensure PWDs' mobility and access to facilities needs to be strengthened.

Social norms and practices in Maldives for the realization of children's rights require that all legislation and policies be in conformity with Sunni Islam, which can be incorrectly seen as in conflict with rights provided for by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This was evident in the reservations made by the Government; the relatively low levels of political participation and civic engagement by citizens, and limitations on service provision due to the geographically dispersed nature of the country's population.

Reports of child abuse, violence, and neglect of children are high with 1,200 cases of sexual abuse of children reported to the police in 2019³⁰¹. Although the new Child Rights Protection Act (19/2019) provides a legislative framework for the protection of children's rights and the right for protection from abuse, violence, neglect and discrimination inclusive of children with disabilities, mechanisms and resources, including human resources capacity, to implement the required systems and services are not in place. The multi-generational

³⁰⁰ MOE statistics, 2019

³⁰¹ <https://www.unicef.org/maldives/press-releases/unicef-maldives-office-press-statement-case-2-year-old-child-being-sexually-abused>

socio-economic vulnerabilities of the poor, who have limited access to social mobility, coupled with endemic substance abuse levels among parents negatively impacts children. Malnutrition and absence of appropriate physical and mental development opportunities for some children also limit full attainment of their rights.

Negative social attitudes surrounding violence (including discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls), hesitancy to report due to social norms and stigma, and lack of functioning communication and referral mechanisms within institutions involved in child protection, all contribute to the persistence of this issue. Furthermore, delayed protection measures (including social service provision, investigative and judicial processes), and lack of availability and accessibility to support services (including mental health support) for survivors further exacerbate the issue.

Holistic approaches and concerted efforts are required to achieve Agenda 2030, particularly SDG 16.2 (End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children) and 5.2 (Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation), and to ensure that no child is left behind.

The CRC Committee, in its 2016 Concluding Observations on the Combined Fourth and Fifth Periodic Report of the Maldives highlighted that 'Violence against children, abuse and neglect are widespread at home, at school, and in the community'. While numerous efforts have been made since then to improve the situation of children, violence against children still continues to be a prevalent and pervasive issue across the country, with 1024 cases of VAC (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, witness to domestic violence, bullying and harassment, exploitation, and cyber bullying) reported to the MoGFSS from January to October 2020. Furthermore, 265 cases of VAC (including physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, threats, sexual harassment, and blackmail) were reported to the Maldives Police Service between January and July 2020. It is significant that reporting rates dropped during the early months of COVID-19 lockdown (a total of 215 for the period April to June 2020). Reporting has surged since (with the total of 471 during the period July to October), with sexual violence being the highest type of case reported (220 cases from April to October).

The Maldives does not have a universal child benefit scheme, which negatively impacts the most vulnerable children. Recent estimates of child poverty are not available in the Maldives. However, households in which children have achieved secondary education are less likely to be living at or below the poverty line, and households with higher dependency ratios are more likely to experience poverty. Most dependency in Maldivian households is made up of children below the age of 14. Child poverty, and particularly child poverty in the atolls, requires ongoing attention from the Government if the country is to meet SDG 1.2 which requires a reduction by half in the proportion of all children living in poverty in all its dimensions.

Adolescents and Youth

Many young people are unwilling to take non-white collar jobs or work for the private sector, due to parental aspirations for 'office jobs' for their children once they complete high school. Others are poorly prepared for work. The structure of the dynamic tourism and construction industries is driven by international migrant workers. In comparison to the national workforce, migrant workers are often subjected to substandard working and living conditions. The paradox of national labour shortages and youth unemployment is a central issue. To attract more young Maldivians into the local workforce, there must be sustained efforts on both the demand and supply sides. Developing a dynamic private sector beyond tourism is essential. Equally essential are sustained efforts for improving working conditions that are family friendly, enhancing skills-matching and reintroducing a local labour market assessment to determine genuine labour shortages, together with more relevant education and vocational training that respond to market needs.

Social stresses also lead to exclusion. Consultations across the country for the 2014 Human Development Report depicted a vicious cycle that children and youth often find difficult to break. Children from broken families or those with substance abusing parents face neglect and often become the centre of disciplinary

issues in school. As a result, they under-perform, face suspension, low attendance, and the risk of expulsion. Additional efforts need to be reinforced to seek technical assistance to develop alternative pathways that can accommodate dropouts and children in conflict with the law.

Many youth do not continue beyond lower secondary school. Many are exposed to drugs, drug dealing and crime, and find it difficult to find jobs, rehabilitation, or other support. A study on gangs in Malé reported that there are between 20-30 different gangs operating in Malé with 50-400 members in each group³⁰². The juvenile justice system and the drug court are meant to be rehabilitative, but they stigmatize, rather than providing second chances. Reform of drug laws and expansion of rehabilitative capacities are essential.

The lack of comprehensive sexuality education, and the remaining dichotomy between young people's sexual development, access to sexualized content online, and the stigmatized local discourse around anything related to sexuality poses additional challenges to many young people in the Maldives. Although data is unavailable there have been reports of young women dropping out of school due to unplanned pregnancies. Recent statistics show the unmet need for family planning in 36 per cent and that 29.5 per cent of pregnancies in 15-24 year old women in the Maldives are unplanned,³⁰³ reflecting both socio-cultural norms and lack of access to reproductive health services. This limits young women's further education and employment opportunities. Sexually active unmarried women face greater barriers. Only 9.8 per cent of unmarried sexually active women are using a modern contraceptive, placing them at risk of unwanted pregnancy, forced marriage to legitimize the pregnancy, unsafe abortion, or stigmatized single motherhood.

As the Maldives transitions from traditional to more urban and modern ways of life, many young people's value orientations are changing, and becoming different from those of their parents and prior generations. This is resulting in a growing distance between older and younger generations, challenges for young people in finding their identity in society (which can lead to mental health problems) and seeking out risky behaviours. There are limited mental health professionals and services in the Maldives, something that should also be addressed within a human capital development strategy.

Drastic shifts in behaviour and perception are sometimes a reaction to such conditions. Extremism is one such reaction, affecting an apparently small but significant number of youths. Several factors likely contribute to this, including the human rights abuses that had occurred in the Maldives,³⁰⁴ a perceived self-serving, corrupt and out-of-touch political class and increased levels of violence in society. Young interviewees³⁰⁵ give lack of opportunity and meaningful employment for youth as a reason for involvement in extremism, while others mentioned frustration and urban overcrowding.

The 2016 National Strategy on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism recognises that taking a purely 'law enforcement' approach to radicalisation, particularly of children and youth, is not effective³⁰⁶. It seeks to take a holistic 'whole of society' and 'whole of government' approach. The Strategy acknowledges that it is necessary to enable and empower community leaders, especially women and youth leaders; enhance critical thinking as a learning process within the education system and promote inclusive and tolerant views by incorporating this into the national curriculum and expanding co-curricular and extra-curricular activities in schools as well as informal learning opportunities. It also recognises the need to address real or perceived grievances and ensure a greater degree of equality through promoting women's and youth's entrepreneurship.³⁰⁷ There is a need to provide diverse opportunities and platforms to increase adolescents and youth engagement and to ensure that their voices are heard in matters that affect them.

³⁰² <https://www.unicef.org/maldives/reports/rapid-situation-assessment-gangs-mal%C3%A9>

³⁰³ Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Ministry of Health, Maldives

³⁰⁴ National Counter Terrorism Centre and UNDP, Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives, February 2019, p.25.

³⁰⁵ Analysing the Situation of Children and Young People in the Republic of Maldives, UNICEF, 2019

³⁰⁶ See also United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT)'s Reference Guide for development of PVE National and Regional Action Plans, 2018.

³⁰⁷ Republic of the Maldives, National Strategy on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, Male, 2017, at p.8.

Adolescence is recognized as a window of opportunity for offsetting childhood disadvantage and altering life trajectories. Evidence on the economic and social impacts of cash transfers (CTs) highlights that such programs can reap multiple dividends across the life cycle—including in terms of school and health service uptake, intrahousehold decision-making, and intimate partner violence. There is growing interest in how to leverage these programmes to improve adolescent well-being across the second decade of life and beyond. However, for social protection to fulfil its transformative potential for women and girls, it must go beyond a narrow focus targeting women in their capacity as mothers and support women’s and girls’ empowerment and gender equality aims more strategically across the lifecycle, including vis-à-vis domestic and care work within the household, access to income and asset generation opportunities, agency and voice within and beyond the household and participation in community decision-making. A gender lens is especially important for the adolescent cohort. Gendered social norms become increasingly salient during adolescence, as girls and boys are propelled along feminine and masculine pathways to adulthood and, as a result, face distinct gendered opportunities but also disadvantage. Cash transfers and other programming concerned with adolescent wellbeing therefore need to be cognizant of adolescents’ gendered needs and the ways in which these may intersect with other forms of discrimination (e.g., based on disability, ethnicity, or migrant status). They also need to be transformed to promote young people’s rights more effectively and to ensure that they benefit directly from adequately provisioned social protection policies and programmes.

Migrants

International migrants

Given its small and dispersed population, international migrant workers are an essential mainstay of the economy. Maldives has experienced an eleven-fold increase in its total migrant population since 1990, and is projected to be around 33 per cent of the resident population by 2029³⁰⁸. Migrants from less developed neighbouring countries – notably, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka – come to Maldives for work.

International migrants dominate the Maldives workforce, represent 16 per cent of the country’s population, and are overrepresented among those of working age. Most migrants are young men from Bangladesh and other South Asian countries, who work in low-skilled jobs in labor intensive sectors like construction. Others work in skilled or semi-skilled jobs in resorts. Fewer in number, are doctors, teachers and other skilled professionals in short supply. While teachers and nurses are increasingly Maldivian, the majority of physicians are still international migrant workers, as these skills remain in short supply in the national workforce.

International migrant workers can help address labour shortages in key sectors such as construction, education, health care, and tourism. Many migrant workers, however, lack access to their human rights, including sufficient labor protection, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Both migrants as well as Maldivians are exposed to shortcomings in labor protections. For instance, there are many young, working-age Maldivians, many of whom are neither working, studying nor are in training as evidenced by the NEET level. While the demand for labor in the tourism sector is growing, employers tend to have a preference for migrant workers due to the lower wages that they are willing to accept, their dependence on the employer for income and avoidance of deportation in cases of irregular migration status. There are limited numbers of Maldivians with skills to work in higher-skilled and more technical positions due to non-availability of specific training in-country and lack of financing opportunity to go for training abroad. This gives rise to resentment against the international migrant workers.

³⁰⁸ Data is based on official sources, which are believed to significantly undercount international migrants, due to the prevalence of undocumented migrants. National Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA (2016). Maldives Population Projections

The current labour recruitment and admission processes for international migrant workers are viewed by many employers as cumbersome and ineffective. Employers are less inclined to bear recruitment costs such as a reluctance to pay their workers' visa fees when hiring lower-skilled international migrant workers. This is also because the existing quota, employment approval and deposit levy systems for international migrant worker recruitment are ineffective. Corrupt practices, such as quota trading have been recorded.

There are often discrepancies between the terms in international migrant workers' contracts and Maldivian legislation regarding working hours, annual leave, and other employment conditions. Often these discrepancies are a result of contract substitution upon arrival of a worker at their workplace, with a new contract with worse conditions. Variation in working conditions and wages also exists between the different nationalities of international migrant workers. There is little monitoring of compliance with laws and regulation driven largely by a lack of political will and the limited capacity of the government institutions in terms of information systems and human resources. Currently, influential employers are often not held accountable for following existing legislation, and there has not been political will to confront abuses in this area. Improving the systems and ensuring that employers absorb recruitment fees as a part of their business costs will be key but difficult challenges in improving the labour migration governance system in the country.

With regard to social security and health, while equal treatment for all is prescribed by law, inequality and gaps remain to be addressed. It is no longer mandatory for employers to enroll migrant workers in the Maldives Retirement Pension Scheme, and migrant workers, even long-term residents, are not entitled to any of the social security measures that citizens are entitled to. Despite an obligation of employers to provide all migrant workers with health insurance, the coverage provided – especially to lesser skilled workers – is typically the most basic. This results in migrants not seeking medical care until a health condition is acute.

Employers seeking to recruit migrant workers are required to request a 'quota' with Maldives Immigration. Such quotas are determined by Maldives Immigration based, among other criteria, on information provided by the employer – but it does not necessarily take into consideration the labour market need. The majority of migrants are recruited for specific employment, but once in Maldives many choose to find better positions or be compelled to escape from exploitative or otherwise abusive employment situations, possibly leading to the invalidation of their visa. Others enter on tourist visas and overstay. Such undocumented or irregular migrants are especially vulnerable.

In early 2015, the Government estimated there were at least 35,000 undocumented migrants in Maldives. However, a more recent regularization exercise was suspended after over 100,000 were identified - the real number of these irregular migrants is likely to be much higher although statistics are not available. Data from immigration shows that the number of returnees (including deported, voluntary, and non-voluntary repatriation) from Maldives was over 6,000 in 2016.³⁰⁹ A process for regularization of status allows migrants to change employers if the latter was responsible for the irregular status. Migrants who have absconded do not qualify as they are required to report the problem before absconding with the Labour Relations Authority or Maldives Immigration. Generally, few migrants are regularized due a combination of reasons, including inadequate regularization rules, poor publicity of the regularization process and migrants' distrust of authorities.³¹⁰ NGOs who work directly with migrants have expressed interest in being consulted on the design and implementation of regularization procedures, as they feel they could positively contribute to the process.

Multiple issues have emerged, including excessive recruitment fees and related costs, deception about working and living conditions, a lack of pre-departure and post arrival employment information, exposure to violations of labour and other human rights, unlawful subcontracting of workers, unsafe working conditions (and resulting health hazards), ineffective monitoring of recruitment and employment practices and high

³⁰⁹ Plewa P (2019). Migration in Maldives: A country Profile, International Organisation for Migration. p.66

³¹⁰ *ibid.*

recruitment costs, weak sanctions for labour law violations, human trafficking and other decent work deficits. In collaboration with multilateral partners, efforts are underway to formulate the National Migration Policy. The legislation to Prevent and Combat the Smuggling of Migrants have also been earmarked to be submitted to the Parliament in 2020. Irregular migrants, and many in low skilled sectors often lack access to adequate housing, adequate health care and other ESC rights. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants who protested against harsh quarantine and/or deprivation of liberty and unpaid wages, were vulnerable to deportation in the absence of due process. The pandemic also exposed migrants to stigma, xenophobia, and discrimination, even being labelled “national security threats” as well as disease carriers.

The Government has taken significant steps in recent years to prevent human trafficking, notably through the “Prevention of Human Trafficking Act” in 2013, development of related action plans and the establishment of an ad hoc committee. The National Steering Committee on Human Trafficking, established in 2016 and inactive for some time, was reconstituted and reconvened in 2019. The Government is currently in a process to amend the definition of human trafficking in line with the 2000 United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol.³¹¹ However, the Government yet does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, despite making significant efforts. It has convicted two individuals for trafficking-related offences, convened the National Anti-Trafficking Steering Committee (NAHTSC) for the first time in two years, and drafted and finalized the Maldives National Anti-Human Trafficking Action Plan 2020 - 2022. Despite continued reports of trafficking among migrant workers, including non-payment of wages and passport retention, the Government did not hold employers or the recruitment agencies accountable. For the fourth consecutive year, the Government did not adopt a standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification, protection, and referral, thereby inhibiting proactive identification of victims and, at times, resulting in the deportation of victims.

There is no asylum adjudication system in the country, and no national refugee protection mechanism. The national legal framework does not provide sufficient clarity on the treatment of asylum-seekers, victims of trafficking and migrants. National instruments, including the Anti-Human Trafficking Act 12/2013, are silent on protection mechanisms for victims of trafficking who may have international protection needs and who fear persecution if returned to their country of origin. There is no mechanism in place to support those without identity documents to establish their nationality and prevent statelessness.

In 2019, Maldives Immigration forwarded 27 cases of suspected fraudulent recruitment and human trafficking to MPS for further investigation and charges were raised against 4 individuals, with their trials ongoing. On 19 February 2019, 24 recruitment companies were blacklisted on the Expat Online System. MED has since ceased provision of all administrative services to these companies.

A revised Employment Agency Regulation was enacted in July 2019. It mandates employment agencies to establish service outlets accessible to the public, obligates recruitment of migrant workers through registered and regulated employment agencies in source countries, and affords authority to MED to blacklist agencies in contravention of the Employment Act and anti-human trafficking laws.

To ensure effective provision of legal aid by the State, a Legal Aid Bill was formulated in consultation with all stakeholders and has been included in the Legislative Agenda. The proposed mechanism will extend legal representation to victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. However, with the Maldives endorsement of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), there is a need for adoption of all relevant international labor and other migration standards, for national development strategies to align with those standards, and to ensure these standards and strategies are integrated into development plans and public policies in consultation with migrants and civil society stakeholders.

³¹¹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-trafficking-in-persons-report-2/maldives/>

There is no system in place to differentiate between migrants and asylum seekers / refugees. In absence of national asylum procedures, it is possible that asylum seekers and refugees are not being identified and often mistaken as international migrants and thus not afforded the treatment as enshrined in International refugee law and human rights law. Over the past year, the Maldives has received a handful of persons who have expressed their intention to claim asylum. There is no asylum adjudication system in the country as the Maldives is not signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, neither are there any national refugee protection mechanisms in place.

Internal Migrants

It is important to understand frameworks in place for IDPs because as a small island developing state, Maldives is very vulnerable to climate change factors, including the threat of rising sea levels and temperatures, as well as more frequent and severe weather events.³¹² IDPs are likely to be formed in the smaller islands as salination, and coastal erosion intersects with scarce natural resources in the island and inhabitants' lack of services. Given that in 2012 over 40 per cent of the population resided within 100 metres of the coastline flooding and other natural disaster risks severely threaten the food security, livelihood, health, and well-being of vulnerable groups.³¹³ Most human settlements are situated in inundation and beach erosion risk zones.³¹⁴ With projections of sea levels rises of 88cm between 1990 and 2100, many islands of Maldives are likely to become submerged or uninhabitable due to frequent inundations.³¹⁵ Consequently, a significant section of the Maldives population is at heightened risk of climate change-induced displacement.

The aftermath of the Tsunami prompted the Government to put in place new assistance programmes and institutions for IDPs that had not existed, including an inter-ministerial committee, a taskforce to address relief operations, and the National Disaster Management Centre.³¹⁶ However, despite environmental challenges, only 7 per cent of those who had experienced an extreme natural event had chosen to migrate with only 2 per cent moving to the Malé atoll due to environmental circumstances.³¹⁷ These trends indicate that most of the internal migration that has led to the overcrowding of Malé has been mainly for the pursuit of economic and educational opportunities and to access higher quality services.

The Government is now committed to develop regional centres for decentralised growth. In the past, to encourage voluntary internal migration to regional centres, a Population Consolidation Programme developed affordable housing, social services, and communication infrastructure in five regional centres (Dhuvaafaru, Gan, Kudahvadhoo, Maamigili and Vilufushi). People willing to relocate to those centres were promised new housing and a relocation grant. Additionally, the Government promoted land reclamation, resettlement policies and income-generating activities in "growth centres". But between 2000 and 2006, only 3,356 people migrated under the Programme. Many Maldivians living in the outer islands preferred to move to Malé instead of regional centres, resulting in overcrowding issues and social ills in the capital. Very few Malé - based residents – apart from women reuniting with their families, were interested in moving to the regional centres.

The current decentralisation programs are focused on infrastructure-led investment and local governance. These and other measures are designed to spark major job creation and service improvements, creating regional growth poles as alternatives to Malé.

³¹² https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IDPersons/A.HRC.19.54.Add.1_en.pdf p. 6

³¹³ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IDPersons/A.HRC.19.54.Add.1_en.pdf p. 6

³¹⁴ https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mp_maldives_2018.pdf p. 29

³¹⁵ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IDPersons/A.HRC.19.54.Add.1_en.pdf p. 7

³¹⁶ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IDPersons/A.HRC.19.54.Add.1_en.pdf p. 8

³¹⁷ https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mp_maldives_2018.pdf p. 30

Others at Risk

Persons with disabilities³¹⁸

The Maldives social protection and disability study 2017-2019 estimated the disability prevalence to be 6.7 per cent.³¹⁹ The prevalence of any disability increases with age,³²⁰ from 1 per cent of females below age 5 to 10 per cent of those age 60 and over. Among males, prevalence rises from 2 per cent of those under age 5 to 11 per cent of those age 60 and over. It is estimated that 6.3 per cent of live births are born with a birth defect, with subsequent disability.³²¹ This figure is well below the global and regional average, presumably because disability is identified based on a medical model rather than a social model (in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which defines “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”). Such approach would impact persons with disabilities in the Maldives, including on their enjoyment of human rights. It is crucial to ensure a rights-based approach rather a charity approach.

Access to treatment and rehabilitation therapy is limited mainly to Malé and physical therapy at regional hospitals with resulting gaps in service for a range of disabilities. Lack of access to a health care consultation is a major barrier confronting PWDs in attempting to gain access to services provided by the Government and in participating in activities targeted for them. Consultation is recognised as one of the primary strategies in human rights-based development, particularly in policy formulation. Consultation must also be a core element in service delivery for PWDs. Although the Health Master Plan identifies the need for establishing services for the treatment and rehabilitation of PWDs, these services have not been prioritized.

The Child Rights Protection Act (Law No. 19/2019) requires the government to arrange treatment for children with mental and physical disabilities. In addition, it requires all efforts to be made to enable participation of children with disabilities in society, with special assistance being made available. There have been attempts for including children with disabilities in the education system, however, there are number of capacity gaps to the provision of inclusive education in the schools. Training of special education teachers and getting teachers to respect and protect the rights of children with disabilities are major challenges. There is virtually no access to or transition to secondary level education for children with disabilities. Another challenge facing young people with disabilities and their parents is the lack of planned transitions from school to work, vocational training, tertiary education, or other meaningful day-time activities.³²²

A Law on Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and providing Financial Assistance (8/2010) provides a monthly disability allowance of MVR 2000 (\$129.70). Eligibility for the scheme is solely determined by the assessment conducted by a medical professional, without a means test. However, access to disability assessment is limited to only one center in Malé, excluding the most vulnerable. This scheme covers children, and the allowance is paid to their caregiver until the child turns 18, after which it is paid to them directly. The benefit value is a fixed amount regardless of the degree of disability of the applicant. An analysis of the scheme in 2017-2019 found that only 25.5 per cent of people with disabilities receive this benefit,³²³ reflecting the poor access to disability services. Furthermore, an impact assessment study showed there was no impact on the quality of life of the people with disabilities receiving this benefit³²⁴.

The most obvious gap in services provided to PWDs in the Maldives is lack of employment services. There is no government-organised support or services to PWDs for obtaining jobs. The challenges around employment

³¹⁸ Drawn from Maldives’ response to an OHCHR questionnaire pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 31/6, 2016

³¹⁹ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Eskey (2020). Maldives social protection and disability study 2017-2019. Preliminary results.

³²⁰ Ministry of Health and ICF (2019). Maldives Demographic Health Survey 2016/2017. Ministry of Health, Maldives.p.17

³²¹ Faisal A, Ibrahim N, Rasheed H, Mustafa M (2019). Birth defects in government referral hospital 2016-2018

³²² Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (2010). Baseline assessment on activities addressing rights of persons with disabilities.

³²³ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Eskey (2020). Maldives social protection and disability study 2017-2019. Preliminary results

³²⁴ *ibid*

include discrimination in the labour market and workplace and low expectations and assumptions about what PWDs can and cannot do.³²⁵ Some PWDs need reasonable accommodation in the workplace for them to be effective and to work to their full capacity, or to retain a job following an accident which are not forthcoming. Accessible transport to and from work and accessible workplaces are also critical factors in ensuring people can work. The MoGFSS advocates for employment opportunities for PWDs within the public and private sector. Some government institutions allocated employment opportunities for PWDs; however, most were vacant.

The state initiated a social housing scheme to allocate apartments for PWDs. However, advocates for PWDs raised concerns regarding corruption in the selection process. High quality, comparable data on disability required for the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies are not available. There is a need for better coordination and cooperation for developing and updating the disability registry as required by law and integrating this data with social protection schemes and services.

Affirmative actions are not applied in the Maldives for combating structural discrimination against PWDs such as disability inclusive development in spatial and socio-economic spheres.

Person with mental health conditions

There is little research on mental health in the Maldives. A 2003 survey³²⁶ reported that more than 29.1 per cent of the respondents stated that they had a mental health condition. The study also reported that nearly 5 per cent suffer from anxiety and depression and nearly 4 per cent reported somatic symptoms. More than twice as many women as men suffer from anxiety, depression, and somatic disorders. There has also been a trend of increasing suicides, particularly among youth. However, no formal research figures are available.

Most recently, mental health deterioration is increasing due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will have a major impact on vulnerable groups. Mental disorders include an important human rights dimension and people with mental disorders are a vulnerable population group. There is significant stigma and discrimination around mental disorders, which can lead to denial of basic human rights such as health, education, employment, housing, welfare services and other civil rights.³²⁷ Mental health and wellbeing are linked to broader social issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, family disruption, educational failure, substance use, unemployment and poverty. These issues have important implications for the prevention of mental disorders and conversely, addressing mental health is important to tackling these broad social issues.

The results of a survey done in 2006 on Women's Health and Life Experiences showed that more than 1 in 3 women (34.6 per cent) aged 15-49 reported experiencing physical or sexual violence during their lifetime.³²⁸ This research also showed that psychological distress for women who have experienced physical or sexual partner violence is significantly higher than for those not experiencing violence.

The National Drug Use Survey 2011-2012 revealed that mental health problems were common in this population. Data on mental health problems among drug users implied that about 15 per cent of drug users in Malé and 9 per cent in the atolls had been diagnosed with a psychological disorder.³²⁹ More than a third of current drug users in Malé stated that they were affected by a mental health problem.

The mental health system in the Maldives is currently limited. Most mental health services are in Malé, with minimal services in the outer islands. There are psychiatric and psychological services in the private sector. The Mental Health Centre at the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH) provides mental health services to the public, mainly in the form of outpatient psychiatric clinics. Inpatient service for psychiatric patients at IGMH is very limited with no psychiatric ward. Over the past year, psychiatrists have been newly posted at the

³²⁵ Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (2010). Baseline assessment on activities addressing rights of persons with disabilities.

³²⁶ Niyaz H, Naz A. Mental health situation in the Maldives. Malé: Ministry of Health; 2003

³²⁷ Health Protection Agency (2017). Mental health policy. Ministry of Health, Maldives

³²⁸ Fulu E. The Maldives Study on Women's Health and Life Experiences. Malé: Ministry of Health and Gender; 2006.

³²⁹ National Drug Use Survey Maldives, Malé: United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime; 2012.

Regional Hospitals. Medications are available and free. However, there is a dearth of trained mental health workers in the country. While there is some mental health training at local institutions for counsellors, nurses, and primary healthcare workers, this is limited with little practical emphasis.

There is no separate financing for mental health care, but psychiatric treatment and medications are covered by the social health insurance scheme. Some financial assistance for chronic mental health problems in childhood and intellectual disability is funded by the State. However, there is little financial assistance for disability associated with chronic psychiatric disorders. There is no recent data on mental health for the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies. There is a pressing need to conduct studies on mental health and disabilities for effective programming and service delivery.

The Maldives National Centre for Mental Health was established in 2019. Improving mental health facilities across Maldives is afforded a high priority, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on the entire population. A National Mental Health Policy 2015-2025 was adopted in 2017. In late-2019 the Maldives Health Ministry announced that psychiatric clinics would be set up in all island hospitals, and that it would initiate campaigns across the country to raise awareness about mental illnesses, and how families and society could care for such individuals. Major efforts will be required to meet the needs of people with mental illness. This was the case before the impact of COVID-19, namely long lockdowns and restrictions, loss of jobs, homes and incomes, and a wide range of limitations on normal life.

Older persons

Five per cent of the population is aged 65 and above.³³⁰ This group is expected to more than double by 2030. While life expectancy of Maldivians has increased from 70 to 79 years in the past 15 years, the healthy life span is 70 years.

The Universal Health Insurance Scheme – Aasandha, introduced in 2012, has mitigated health care related financial burdens and ended health care related impoverishment of older adults. A state funded old age basic pension scheme, in operation since 2010, covers all citizens 65 and above. Currently, the state pension is MVR 5,000 (approximately US\$300) per month.

Most families in Malé live in apartments with small rooms. Older adults often share rooms with grandchildren. Traditionally, elderly family members are cared for in an extended family setting, but this has become less common due to inadequate living space and internal migration. In some cases, parents are left alone on remote islands. Some without family support are sent to live in a Government centre for vulnerable adults in K. Guraidhoo. Presently, Maldives is moving away from the pattern of an extended family to a nuclear family. The tradition was that the elderly were cared for by family members, particularly the women.³³¹ Unfortunately, care giving for the elderly is required when the adult children have children or even grandchildren of their own negatively impacting the elderly parent's care.

There is limited information and data on older persons' participation in society, with emerging concern of exclusion of the elderly, increasing loneliness among older populations and limited options for productive engagement of the elderly in society. Respondents in one study conducted in Malé³³² preferred to live with their children and appreciated the level of care given by their children. The absence of modified homes and adapted built environments and suitable housing for families living with elderly parents means that healthy older adults' levels of physical activities, social interaction and independence are limited.

³³⁰ National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Maldives Population and Housing Census, 2014. Statistical release 1: Population and households. P.13

³³¹ Didi R., Implications of ageing in Maldives. Regional Health Forum – Volume 16, Number 1, 2012

³³² Nazra A., 'Perceptions of Ageing Among Older Adults Living in Male', Maldives and Implications for Provision of Support', International Journal of Social Research and Innovation, Volume 2, Issue 1 - August 2018

Unavailability of environmental, social and health support services that are dedicated towards elders negatively influenced their perspective of ageing. While some participants showed resilience and adapted to the circumstances, others perceived the physical and social barriers to ageing with fear and restricted their physical activities and social interactions. Maldives has no specific facilities for geriatric care. Age related minor illnesses are treated at tertiary-multipurpose hospitals. There are very few organizations for older adults. More needs to be done to support the ability of the elderly to live an independent life for as long as possible, through schemes such as adapted housing and home nursing support.

A national elderly policy was launched in 2017 with four focus areas: care and protection, independence and participation, health and wellbeing and preparation for old age. The current government launched a new action plan 2019-2021 focusing on actions in the SAP for addressing issues faced by the elderly³³³.

Regional and urban/atoll differences

The geographic distribution of services across many small islands limits opportunities and often results in migration to Malé. The Household Income and Expenditure (HIES) 2019³³⁴ highlights a huge income disparity exists between Male' and in the Atolls, with almost 60% of the atoll population getting less than \$250, while only 18% of the Male' gets this amount. Inequality between Male' and the atolls has a negative impact on social cohesion. This can act as a trigger point for future social tensions if policy measures are not taken to address the underlying issues. Geography causes a relative disconnect between Malé and the atolls, and between atolls and small islands, encouraging reliance on local community-based structures and support networks, often consisting of just a few families. As adults and youth migrate to Malé, those networks are increasingly strained, with growing, negative social consequences.

An estimated 45.5 per cent of the population lives in urban areas.³³⁵ Due to constant internal migration³³⁶ from the atolls to Malé and a low fertility rate, it is anticipated that this will continue to increase. It is estimated that by 2030 that over half of the population will be living in Malé with this increasing to 64 per cent of resident Maldivians living in Malé by 2054.³³⁷ This will have a significant impact on infrastructure and demand for services, including education, health and social services, to the continued disadvantage of the atolls.

Challenges to Addressing Exclusion

The geographic realities of the Maldives consistently bring the government of the day to choose social protection responses to exclusion and vulnerability that are largely undifferentiated, because these measures assist all persons and are easiest to administer. The social safety net is largely made up of cash transfer programmes for specific groups such as the universal health insurance scheme (Aasandha) and blanket subsidies for electricity. Although simple and universal, these programmes have some unfavourable features, they are costly and lack a redistributive effect.

The current basket of social protection programmes lacks an assessment of the specific social protection needs of rights holders, and extent of coverage, e.g. for persons working within the informal economy. Partners have therefore repeatedly recommended that the social safety net programmes be restructured to account for various vulnerabilities that face the population, particularly based on location, income, and identity. Action is needed to develop criteria and preferences and improve the feasibility and impact of the programmes.

³³³ <https://corporatemaldives.com/first-lady-launches-the-national-elderly-action-plan-2019-2021>

³³⁴ <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Income-Summary-v2.pdf>

³³⁵ <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/MDV/maldives/urban-population> Maldives Urban Population 1960-2019

³³⁶ National Bureau of Statistics, and UNFPA, Maldives Population Projections 2014-2054, <http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Maldives-Population-Projections-2014-2054.pdf>. Analysis of data from the 2006 and 2014 census by the National Bureau of Statistics gives an estimate of 2,200 migrants from the Atolls to Male' each year.

³³⁷ National Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA, Maldives Population Projection 2014-2054, Assumptions and Results Analysis, p.13. This is an important finding as the current government of Maldives has set the consolidation of 70 per cent of the population in the Greater Male' Area by 2050.

Despite the enactment of the gender equality law (18/2016), growing religious conservatism in the country poses a challenge for gender equality and access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, particularly for unmarried sexually active young people, sex workers and LGBT persons. This hampers the provision of health and social protection services for victims/survivors of gender-based and domestic violence.

Similarly, despite enactment of the law on disability (8/2010), there is limited access to health care and human capacity to improve access to care and rehabilitation for persons with disabilities including mental health and age-related disabilities.

The ongoing programme of decentralisation, including localisation of social services, can provide a foundation for the successful provision of targeted social services. This is a long-term project that will require building a national network of social services institutions and professionals at island and regional levels, and national capacities for policy guidance, monitoring and support.

Chapter 5. Commitments under International Norms and Standards

The Maldives has engaged positively with the international human rights system with most of the treaties ratified (see Annex 2). Since 2005, Maldives has joined seven of the nine core human rights conventions and six optional protocols, including individual complaints procedures under the Convention Against Torture (CAT), ICCPR and CRC. Maldives has expressed its intention to accede to the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED) in 2020 but has not expressed plans to accede to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW).

On 18 December 2019, President Solih signed a declaration for the acceptance of Article 22 of CAT recognizing the competence of the Committee Against Torture to receive complaints or such submissions from individuals subjected to torture, provided that the victims were under the jurisdiction of Maldives.

The Government of Maldives signed the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 4th September 2019. Reservations against Articles 14 (1) and 21 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child remain despite the observations of the 2016 CRC Committee recommending that the Maldives consider withdrawing its reservations to these two Articles.

Treaty Bodies

The Government of Maldives has embarked on a very ambitious agenda to ensure compliance with its international treaty obligations and is constructively engaged with human rights treaty bodies. However, a number of reports to treaty bodies are overdue.³³⁸ The Maldives noted in the previous UPR cycle the challenges and limitations faced as a small island developing state and in fulfilling its reporting obligations under international conventions, due to lack of expertise, human resources, among other issues.³³⁹

HRC and Special Procedures

Maldives became a member of the Human Rights Council in 2010 and was re-elected for a second term for the period 2014-2016. During the UPR Review session on November 2020, Maldives' progress in protecting human rights within the past four and a half years were reviewed. The country received 259 recommendations from 95 Member States, mainly covering the areas of governance, ratifying international human rights instruments, and urging the Government to continue efforts in gender equality and child protection, safeguarding safe migrants' rights, combatting human trafficking and addressing climate change. Multiple countries recommended Maldives sign and ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families and take necessary actions to strengthen the implementation of the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act 2013. The Government decided to examine all recommendations and report back to the Human Rights Council in March 2021 with its final positions thereon.

Maldives has extended a standing invitation to all mandate holders of the special procedures under the Human Rights Council and has so far hosted seven visits of special rapporteurs.³⁴⁰ The recommendations made by Special Rapporteurs have led to a number of positive changes in law, policy and practice. In particular the 2013 visit of the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers had a transformative impact on the Government's reform agenda.

³³⁸ ICCPR (two reports overdue since 2015); ICESCR (one report overdue since 2008); CERD (overdue since ?)

³³⁹ : A/HRC/30/8/Add.1

³⁴⁰ Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (2007); Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers (2007, 2013); Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living (2009); Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (2009); UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights (2019); Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (2019)

National Human Rights Framework

The Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM) was established in 2003 as an independent and autonomous statutory body by a Presidential Decree. In 2006 the Human Rights Commission Act came into force and became a constitutional body with the ratification of the 2008 Constitution established body on ratification of the Act. The Act was amended, in 2014, to give the Commission a greater degree of autonomy. The mission of the HRCM is to promote and protect human rights under the Constitution, Islamic Sharia and international human rights conventions ratified by the Maldives.

The HRCM has important and positive institutional safeguards for human rights. However, their work still does not appear to ensure fully an effective system of oversight and accountability. No official has ever been held accountable for torture or ill-treatment, nor has any victim ever received redress, despite reports that several hundred complaints have been submitted since the Anti-Torture Act (2013) came into force. Inadequate budget, limited resources, and a shortage of qualified, trained staff are considered major constraints. The Commission has B status accreditation from the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions It has not obtained A status on several grounds, including concern that it may be interpreting its mandate in a manner inconsistent with international human rights law, particularly with regard to recognized protection against all forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and with regard to the founding legislation that provides that all members of the Commission must be Muslim.³⁴¹

The current Government established two transitional justice commissions. The Commission on Murders and Disappearances is charged with investigating cases between 1 January 2012 and 17 November 2018 that have not been properly investigated. The second is charged to investigate Corruption and Asset Recovery.³⁴² A Transitional Justice Bill was passed by Parliament in December 2020, which will include cases dating back before democratization of the country.

Incorporation of international human rights norms into national law

Revision of the Anti-Torture Act is needed to ensure that it provides for punishment commensurate with the gravity of the offence of torture and does not condition punishment on the duration of the victim's hospitalization, noting that some forms of torture may not inflict physical suffering at all.³⁴³

In 2010, the Maldivian Parliament passed the Disabilities Act, which gave persons with disabilities the legal right to adequate and standardized social and health services.

Incorporating CEDAW provisions fully into the national legal system remains a challenge. However among positive legislative steps, Maldives adopted comprehensive legislation addressing violence against women, the Domestic Violence Act in 2012 and the Gender Equality Act in 2016.

In April 2013, a ministerial-level committee was established by the President to conduct a review and propose a holistic reform of the existing child protection mechanisms in Maldives. A new Child Rights Protection Act was ratified in November 2019 and provides for the appointment of a Children's Ombudsman. A first Juvenile Justice Act was ratified in November 2019, raised the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 15 years, prohibiting the death penalty for minors, and focusing on diversion and alternatives to detention, as well as better prevention and rehabilitation services.

Maldives is one of the 50 Bali Process countries and took the significant positive step in 2013 to pass the Anti-Human Trafficking Act, which makes trafficking in persons a criminal offence with perpetrators liable to 10 to 15 years imprisonment. The bill, which entered the Maldivian parliament – the People's Majlis – in April 2013, also criminalizes offenses such as forced labour and fraudulent recruitment as acts of human trafficking.

³⁴¹ CAT/C/MDV/CO/1, para 15

³⁴² CAT/C/MDV/CO/1, para 7.

³⁴³ CAT/C/MDV/CO/1, para 20

Other important pending bills related to protection of human rights include the bills on legal aid, evidence, and witness protection. Acts related specifically to Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, include the Pensions Act (2009), the Social Protection Act (2011) to ensure the Right to Social Security, general Health Act (2012), Maternal and Child Health Bill, Education Act (law no. 24/2020), Protection and Financial Assistance to Persons with Disabilities Act (2010), and the Employment Act (2008).

Other multilateral treaty obligations

Maldives has ratified the Rome Statute. Maldives is not a Party to the 1951 Convention relating to the status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Maldives is not party to the *1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons* nor to the *1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness*.

Maldives joined the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2009. In 2013, Maldives ratified all eight of the core ILO conventions, after consideration for nearly two decades. It has not ratified any of the priority governance conventions, and only two of 178 technical conventions. All ten ILO Conventions ratified by Maldives are in force.

Maldives joined the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2011.

The Maldives participated in the adoption of the Global Compact on Safe Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) (2018), the first global agreement on a common approach to international migration in all its dimensions. The GCM is an important basis for better managing migration and ameliorating conditions for migrants and the resident population. The Maldives has not completed voluntary reporting on implementation of the GCM. Maldives is not party to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

In February 2013, Maldives acceded to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

The Maldives ratified the UN Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Protocol (2000) in December 2015, and adopted it in the Maldives Prevention of Human Trafficking Act (PHTA) (2013)

Maldives ratified the United Nations Framework *Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) and is a party to the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement as well as a number of other multilateral conventions related to climate change the protection of the environment. (See Annex 2). Maldives has committed to non-legally binding agreements/ frameworks such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster risk reduction.

Maldives was elected to the Executive Board of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in 2012.

Chapter 6. Cross boundary and regional / sub-regional perspectives

External partnerships and influences

Maldives has built and maintained positive relationships with neighboring countries, Gulf and other Arab states, western nations, and multilateral organisations. In recent years its growing relationships with Saudi Arabia and China have become associated with challenges around modernisation, democracy, and conservatism within the country. The challenges and potential negative effects of these relationships, e.g., the increasing levels of debt and their impact on maximum available resources for the progressive realisation of economic, social and cultural rights, and the rise of conservative Islam and extremism and their implications for the realisation of women's rights, have become central issues.

Other important issues have emerged from Maldives external relationships around links to the global economy and oil dependence, trade, environmental issues and migration flows and links to developments in countries from which migrants come for employment in the Maldives.

From independence, the development path of Maldives has been broadly aligned with the creation of a modernising and religiously moderate form of government, and the country has been close to its South Asian neighbours, particularly India and Sri Lanka. At the same time, while the country has followed a traditional, moderate form of Islam, Islam is the state religion, only Muslims can hold citizenship in the country and citizens are barred from practicing any faith other than Islam. From the 1970s, the religious influence of Saudi Arabia and other conservative Islamic nations has coloured the development of modern institutions and the interpretation of Islam as practiced in the Maldives.

The advent of political democracy in 2008 heightened tensions inherent in the interpretation of democracy in Islamic society. Globally, Islamic religious scholars and intellectuals fall into three broad camps regarding democracy. Fundamentalists reject both democracy and secularism, which has been the position of Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia. The second conservative camp claims that returning to the "true tenets" of Islam will create the best kind of democracy. The third camp (more common among lay intellectuals than among clerics) advocates *ijtihad*, or reinterpreting Islam to make it compatible with the universal concept of democracy.³⁴⁴

Changes in religious attitudes and practices have been linked to public and private Saudi Arabian efforts to promote Wahhabism.³⁴⁵ In the Maldives the rise of Wahhabism can be linked to many of the Maldivian students who received free education from Wahhabi madrasas in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 1980s³⁴⁶. Masjids have been built with Saudi public funds. The Saudi-headquartered and financed Muslim World League also supports Islamic associations, masjids, and investment plans. The Islamic Development Bank, headquartered in Saudi Arabia, strengthens "Islamic cohesion" between its lenders and borrowers, who are member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

During the previous administration, the growing influence of Saudi Arabia in the Maldives was reflected in Maldives' decision to sever diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016. In 2017 Maldives became one of the first countries outside the Gulf to join Saudi Arabia in cutting ties with Qatar. During that year there was an attempt to lease part of an atoll to a key member of the Saudi Arabian Royal Family as a Special Economic Zone.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Olivier Roy, 'Islam: The Democracy Dilemma', The Wilson Institute, screen capture February 21, 2020. The export of Wahhabi influence from Saudi Arabia has been a complex reality. While some entities involved are government ministries and agencies, others are funded by the Saudi royal family, and still others are linked to the Kingdom's religious establishment.

³⁴⁵ Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, 'Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy', Brookings Institution, November 2018

³⁴⁶ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/violent-extremism-in-the-maldives-the-saudi-factor/>

³⁴⁷ <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-severs-diplomatic-ties-with-iran-124284> <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-severs-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-131067>

<http://transparency.mv/v16/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/TM-Review-Issue-5-V3.pdf>

In early 2018, at the time of the previous government's State of Emergency in Maldives, as part of the support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Saudi Fund for Development and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development pledged \$160 million in support of the Maldives. This reflected growing co-operation between the two countries. Saudi Arabia had already promised the Maldives a five-year soft loan facility of \$300m when the country's previous president visited Riyadh.

During the time in office of the previous government, China became a major source of support outside the western rights-based development consensus and without western-style conditionalities. Chinese influence, primarily through investment, has brought the country to a new level of development but has also created serious concerns regarding debt sustainability and local corruption.

China's recent interest in the Maldives, despite its small population, reflects its strategic location in a section of the Indian Ocean that touches the main shipping route between China, the oil suppliers of the Middle East and Europe. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) brought a major push by Chinese state companies to finance and build large-scale infrastructure projects across Asia and beyond, and the previous government's ambitious plans for Greater Malé made it a promising target for BRI projects. Chinese investment in the Maldives became significant in 2014, during the first ever visit by a Chinese head of state.

Concluding that it was unfeasible to provide decent public services to all 200 inhabited islands, Hulhumalé, an artificial island created in stages since 1997 by filling in a nearby coral lagoon, trebled in size to accommodate 240,000 inhabitants, or more than half the entire country's current population. Chinese funding was central to these projects.

Finance Ministry data show that well over \$1 billion in Chinese loans were agreed in the four years after 2014, all either borrowed directly or guaranteed by the Maldivian government.³⁴⁸ Chinese state companies lent \$547.9 million to fund the construction of 11,000 apartments in high-rise blocks that would be built in the second phase of Hulhumalé. A further \$180.9 million for work was lent to extend the electricity grid to the new island, and \$421 million to expand the airport. The most celebrated project was the \$210 million Friendship Bridge, funded mostly by a \$126 million Chinese government grant and a \$68 million loan from Export Import Bank of China.

In 2016, state-owned China Communications Construction Company signed a contract with the leader of one of the parties in the government's ruling coalition for the biggest resort development deal in Maldivian history. The project was funded with debt from the Export Import Bank of China, with the loans guaranteed by the Maldivian government up to an amount of \$127.5 million. The terms of the deal remained secret until the new government took power. Officials in the current government say such arrangements were typical.

The current government has sought to reduce the debts owed, as well as renegotiating the interest rates and repayment schedules. It has argued that the stated project costs, and the loans that funded them, were substantially inflated, with much of the surplus flowing to corrupt Maldivian officials. The new government's biggest concerns relate to the \$646 million of sovereign-guaranteed Chinese loans to Housing Development Corporation, the Maldivian state company responsible for developing Hulhumalé. Work on these residential projects, including the construction of sixteen 25-storey tower blocks by China State Construction Engineering, is continuing. The economic logic for such large-scale development has weakened after the new government dropped the policy drive to concentrate the population in Greater Malé, instead promising decentralised support for communities in the atolls.

While some in the ruling Coalition claim that Maldives has fallen into a debt trap with China and oppose a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed with China, the President has not been publicly critical of Chinese influence and the debt accumulated during the previous regime. China in turn has stressed that no change of government

³⁴⁸ Simon Mundy and Kathrin Hille, 'The Maldives counts the cost of its debts to China', Financial Times, February 10, 2019

would impact Chinese support to development in Maldives, that China has been a key development partner and is the largest tourist source market for the Maldives. China has also stressed that the FTA was signed by the two governments after years of negotiations and consultation on equal footing and that any further decisions would be made only after careful consideration.

India, whose coast lies less than 500km from the Maldives' northernmost atoll, has historically been the island state's most important diplomatic partner. But the relationship deteriorated severely under the previous government, as New Delhi became increasingly concerned by the Maldives' growing closeness to China. India reacted strongly in August 2017, when three Chinese submarines docked at a Maldivian port.

The relationship with India strengthened once more when Presidential elections in 2018 brought an opposition Coalition to power, and the later election of a Coalition super-majority in Parliament cemented not only a new national agenda but also a shift in foreign policy. A US\$ 1.4 billion Indian package of budgetary support, currency swaps and concessional lines of credit³⁴⁹ and the increase in India's aid to the Maldives from US\$18.1 million in the 2018 budget to US\$83.3 million in 2019 illustrate the importance India places on the relationship. Government officials continuously reiterate Maldives' "India First Policy". Economic, technical and security considerations are paramount for both India and Maldives. Renewed ties with India will give the Maldives additional leverage as it lobbies China for debt forgiveness. And while officials say they still see China as an important partner, they insist that future deals will be arranged with far greater care than in recent years.³⁵⁰

Maldives geographic position athwart the equatorial sea lanes gives it potential geo-strategic importance and the opportunity to promote beneficial relationships with both regional super-powers in the interest of potential support to much-needed areas of development (India is also a growing tourism source for its southern neighbour). India's investment in Maldives also signifies a strong interest in projecting influence into the Indian Ocean, while promoting stability near its southern coastline. China's strong interest to develop Maldives within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, and the interest of Saudi Arabia and others in investment could provide important opportunities for Maldives.

Regional Cooperation in Trade, Connectivity and Disaster Risk Reduction

South Asia is often described as the world's least integrated subregion, with the value of intraregional trade less than one third of its potential on account of high costs, poor supply capacity in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the region, poor trade facilitation at borders, and the prevalence of a variety of non-tariff barriers.³⁵¹ Maldives faces several challenges due to limited number of export products and land, logistics, and transport issues that negatively affect the economics of operating production facilities.³⁵² Of the top 20 products exported, 18 are fishery related. Major export destinations are European Union countries, followed by Thailand, Sri Lanka, and United States. Among South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) countries, according to data from International Monetary Fund from 2017, Maldives' top export markets are Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The largest import source worldwide to Maldives is Sri Lanka, with imported goods valued at \$160 million, with Bangladesh the next largest valued at \$3million (SASEC, 2018). The major trading partners of Maldives among the SASEC countries are Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in terms of export and import values.³⁵³ The UNESCAP (2018) gravity model of export potential of trade shows that Maldives has an export potential of \$332 million dollars and the percentage of unrealized potential is as high as 87 per cent.

³⁴⁹ https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/30765/Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_State_Visit_of_the_President_of_the_Republic_of_Maldives_to_India_December_17_2018

³⁵⁰ Simon Mundy and Kathrin Hille, 'Maldives Seeks to Renegotiate Over Belt and Road Debt', Financial Times, January 31, 2019

³⁵¹ UNESCAP SSWA (2018) Unlocking the Potential of Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in South Asia Potential, Challenges and the Way Forward, South and South-West Asia, New Delhi

³⁵² Usman and Rasheedh (2019) Interpreting SDGs for South Asia: in search of a regional framework - a Maldivian perspective, South and South-West Asia Development Papers 1905, South and South-West Asia, New Delhi

³⁵³ *ibid.*

As a SIDS, Maldives is susceptible to climate change induced disaster risks. Though Maldives has the lowest Average Annual Loss (AAL) (0.56 per cent of GDP) as estimated by UNESCAP (2019) in South Asia, Maldives' economic stocks are exposed to geological hazards such as earthquakes and tsunamis. Maldives participate in regional cooperation for early warning (e.g. RIMES) and Tsunami readiness programmes³⁵⁴, the Coalition on Disaster resilient infrastructure³⁵⁵, and other marine hazard related regional preparedness mechanisms.³⁵⁶

Partnerships for development and attainment of the SDGs

A former British protectorate, Maldives joined the Commonwealth in 1982. In 2016 the Maldives left the Commonwealth, weeks after the organization warned it could be suspended because of its lack of progress in promoting the rule of law and democracy. The current Government applied for readmission, which took effect in February 2020. Re-admission symbolizes the return of Maldives to a full partnership with Commonwealth member states. Members have no legal obligations to one another but are connected through their use of the English language and their stated shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter. The Commonwealth is a forum for the exchange of experiences and the development of coalitions among like-minded countries with similar challenges and experiences.

The Maldives became a member of the [Non-Aligned Movement](#) in 1976. The Maldives is also a member of the [Organisation of Islamic Cooperation](#) (OIC) and maintains close cultural relations with Islamic countries. However, the Maldives has often distanced itself from political positions taken by the OIC.

Cross boundary and regional issues are becoming increasingly important for the Maldives in terms of attaining SDG targets as they have implications for the country's economic growth, diversification, trade, and regional cooperation. Maldives has committed to regional frameworks and standards for the achievement of SDGs. The [Regional Roadmap for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific](#) (2017), serves as the guiding framework for regional cooperation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and for regional cooperation on transboundary challenges, especially regarding National statistical systems for monitoring of progress, integrated policy analysis, and effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

UNESCAP Member States adopted [the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific](#), the world's first regionally agreed disability-specific development goals, and the [Beijing Declaration and Action Plan to Accelerate the Implementation of the Incheon Strategy](#), consisting of strategic guidance on developing concrete policy measures for implementing the Incheon Strategy.

The [Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States](#) held in 2014 in Apia, Samoa resulted in the adoption of the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action – or [SAMOA Pathway](#). It also established a unique intergovernmental [SIDS Partnership Framework](#). Maldives is an active SIDS member. Maldives is a member of the Alliance of Small Island States, and currently chairs its Bureau.

The Maldives was a founder member of the [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation](#) (SAARC) in 1985. As an active member, Maldives has led efforts for a South Asian Free Trade Agreement, the formulation of a Social Charter, the initiation of informal political consultations in SAARC forums, the lobbying for greater action on environmental issues, the proposal of numerous human rights measures such as the regional convention on child rights and for setting up a SAARC Human Rights Resource Centre. The Maldives is also an advocate of greater international profile for SAARC such as through formulating common positions at the UN.³⁵⁷

Maldives adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in 2018.

³⁵⁴ http://www.ioc-tsunami.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=72&Itemid=70&lang=en

³⁵⁵ <https://cdri.world/gallery-detail-01.php>

³⁵⁶ <https://esbn.unescap.org/news/countries-indian-ocean-and-southeast-asia-agree-work-together-disaster-early-warning>

³⁵⁷ http://www.foreign.gov.mv/v3/?p=mem_in_int

In 2019 Maldives became the 22nd member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which was established in 1995. IORA works on strengthening regional cooperation and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean region, with a particular focus also on fisheries management. Recent talks by Maldives in this association focused on challenges in the Indian Ocean such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, terrorism, trafficking in persons and arms.

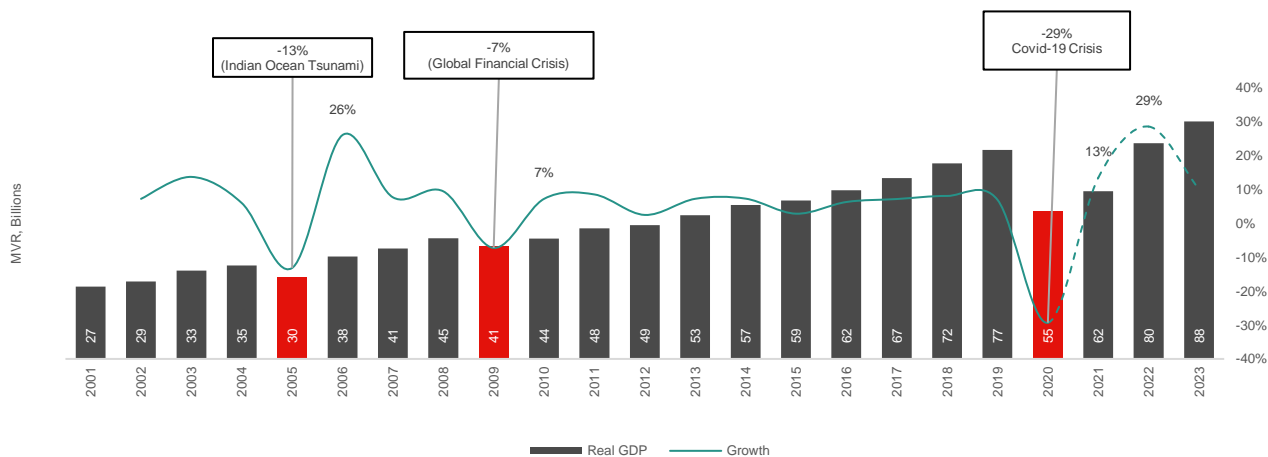
Since 2019, Maldives has also been co-chairing the UNESCAP Group of Experts for Strengthening Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific.³⁵⁸ The contents of the modality and the related action plan will be discussed in May 2020, during the 76th UNESCAP Commission Session.

³⁵⁸ ESCAP, 2018. Report of the Committee on Social Development on its fifth session. Available from: <https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/committee-social-development-fifth-session>

Chapter 7: Financing landscape and opportunities

The financial landscape for the SDGs³⁵⁹

Macroeconomic landscape 2001-2020



With COVID-19 pandemic spreading across the globe, the financing landscape of the Maldivian economy has changed significantly. Initially, the government of Maldives³⁶⁰ projected an economic growth of 7.5 per cent for 2020, however, the Government now estimates the economy to contract by -29.3 per cent in 2020. The forecasted recession would be the largest in the history of the Maldivian economy and is a direct result of the huge deceleration of the tourism industry which is expected to decline by 68.2 per cent in 2020 due to lockdowns and border closures.

For the medium-term, the Ministry of Finance forecasts the economy to steadily rebound in 2021 and 2022 with estimated growth rates of 13.5 per cent and 28.6 per cent respectively with the economy attaining pre-COVID-19 levels in 2022. These projections are mainly based on tourism sector growth estimates, which are closely connected to the recovery of the hospitality and traveling industries across the globe following the COVID-19 pandemic along with the completion of Velana International Airport development project. Its completion is expected to increase the volume of tourist arrivals as flights to the country increase. To meet additional demand, the number of beds is also expected to increase.

With tourism indirectly contributing to a huge fraction of the production of the local economy, the other sectors of the economy are assumed to follow a similar trajectory as the tourism in the medium-term. While infrastructure development has decelerated significantly in 2020 due to the pandemic, the government expects the industry to pick-up significantly in the medium-term as a result of the several new infrastructure projects planned for the upcoming years. These include the Greater Male' Connectivity Bridge, Maldives International Port Development Project, and the Development of five tertiary hospitals across the Maldives as part of the decentralization objective of the current administration. Additionally, transport, retail trade and real estate sectors are also expected to grow in the medium-term.

Reflecting the contraction of the tourism industry, the total government revenue (excluding grants) has declined by 40 per cent from January till October 2020 (compared to the same period in 2019). Both tax and non-tax revenue has decrease over the period, registering growth rates of -36 percent and -54 per cent respectively. Despite the large decrease in revenues, the total expenditure of the government has declined by a marginal 5 per cent from January till October 2020 (compared to the same period in 2019).

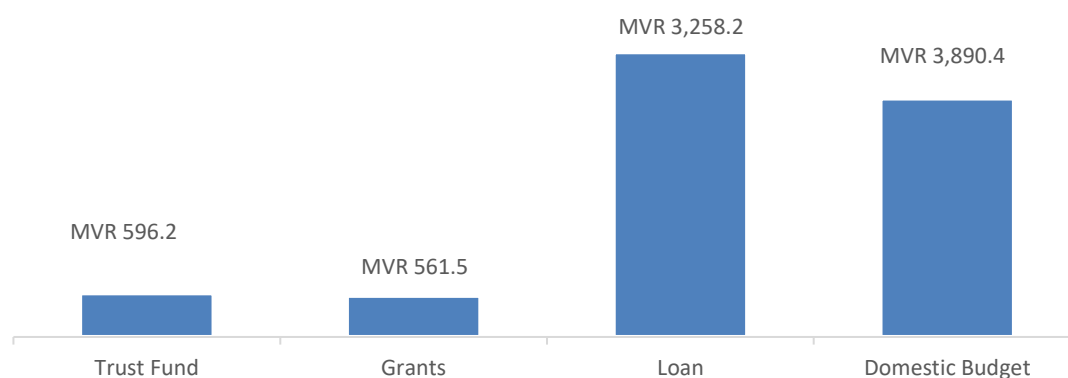
³⁵⁹ All charts from Ministry of Finance (2020) 2021 budget book (in Divehi)

³⁶⁰ Ministry of Finance (2020), Proposed Budget 2021

Over the period, capital expenditure from the government budget has increased from MVR5.9 billion to MVR6.5 billion (US\$383m-422m) due to the increase in the expenses incurred by the government to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic (establishing isolation and quarantine facilities across the Maldives).

With a huge financing gap resulting from the difference between total government revenues and expenditure, the government projects the total government debt (including government guaranteed debt) to rise to MVR85.5 billion (US\$551m) by the end of 2020 which is a 26 per cent increase in public and publicly guaranteed debt from 2019. Total public and publicly guaranteed debt (PPG) are expected to rise to 148 per cent of GDP in 2020, driven by the significant increases in external borrowings to bridge the financing gap incurred by the government in 2020. According to the government 2021 budget, over the medium-term, despite high primary deficits, with rising GDP, the PPG debt as a percent of GDP is expected to decline to 117 per cent of GDP by 2023 which is still above the level stated in the Fiscal Responsibility Act of the Maldives (FRA states that the total debt (including guaranteed debt) must not exceed 60 per cent of the GDP). The high external debt to GDP ratios will also exacerbate the government’s debt service costs in the future as credit agencies will take into consideration the high external debt distress levels in their ratings assigned to the country which has also been a concern raised by the World Bank³⁶¹ and International Monetary Fund (IMF)³⁶² in their assessment of the Maldives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 11: Investment project budget sources – 2021 (in millions of MVR)



It is not possible to fully analyse government expenditure, as there is no programmatic budgeting, nor is there gender responsive budgeting (GRB) or social audit analysis of expenditure.³⁶³ Planned expenditure is aligned with the Government’s SAP.

With low levels of revenue projected for 2021 (due to the sluggish growth anticipated for the tourism industry for 2021 – government estimates less than 1 million tourists to visit Maldives in 2021) external borrowing is estimated to play a major role in financing the budget in 2021 as well. Accordingly, 68 per cent of the financing (MVR13.1 billion – US\$ 850m) is to be achieved via external sources - 24% through foreign loans, 24 per cent through bond issuances, 12 per cent through bilateral and multilateral assistance, and 8 per cent via issuance of green/blue bonds. Similar to 2020, Grant funding is also pivotal for the budget 2021 as it is estimated to provide revenues of MVR2.2 billion (US\$143m) in 2021.

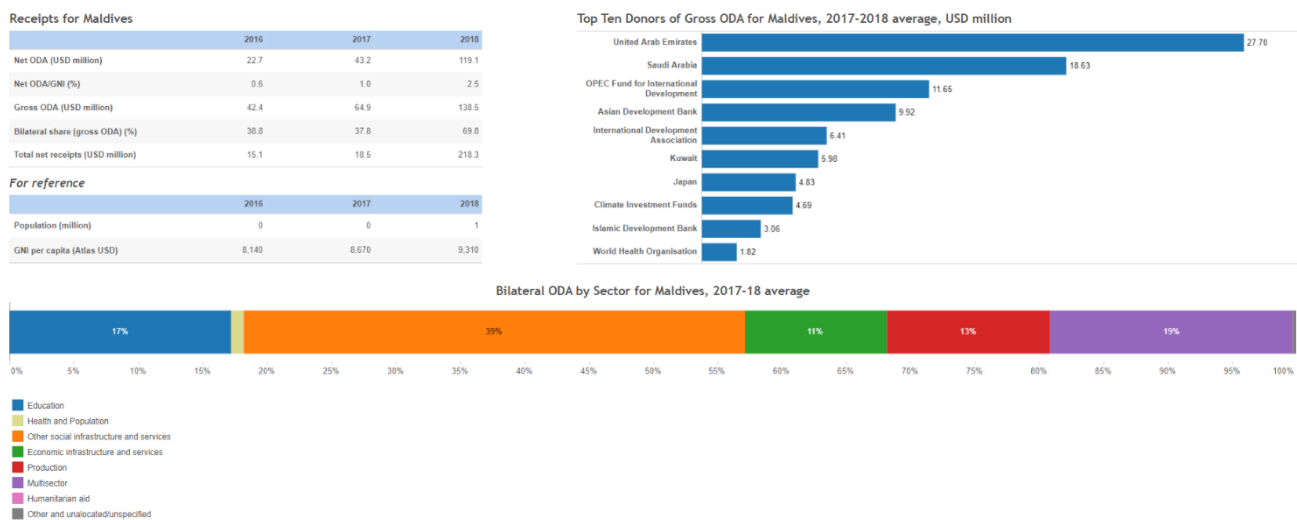
³⁶¹ Maldives Development Update : In Stormy Seas, World Bank, June 2020

³⁶² IMF Country Report 20/133 – April 2020

³⁶³ GRB is in an early stage of development, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD_Gender-Responsive_Budgeting.pdf

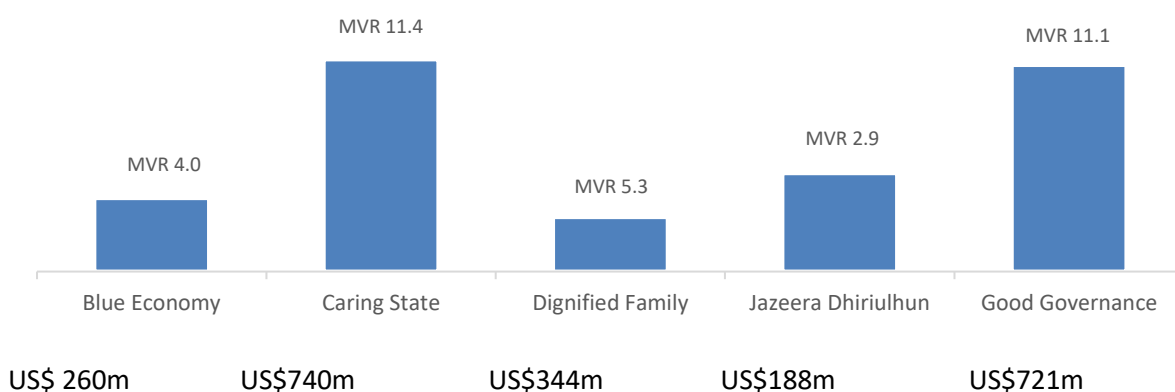
A first Social Audit was published in 2018 by the Anti-Corruption Commission, <https://acc.gov.mv/en/2018/04/publication-of-social-audit-research-report/>

Figure 12: ODA to Maldives 2016-2018³⁶⁴



As a small, upper-middle income country, the Maldives is not a recipient of significant levels of overseas development aid (grants and concessional loans). In the years 2016-2018, the average net aid was around \$62 million annually. Around 40 per cent of this aid was directed towards developing the country's social infrastructure and services, with 17 per cent being directed to education and 11 per cent to economic infrastructure and services. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacting the economy, health and social sectors of the country, developmental assistance has increased significantly in 2020. According to the latest publications of the Ministry of Finance, the government of Maldives has received a total of USD519.9 million till 30th September 2020 of which USD62.4 million is grants and USD218.8 million is concessional loans via multilateral and bilateral sources. Additionally, several agencies (bilateral and multilateral) have also provided in-kind benefits such as Protective Personal Equipment (PPE), Diagnostic and Medical Equipment.

Figure 20: National budget allocations aligned to SAP – 2021 (in billions of MVR)

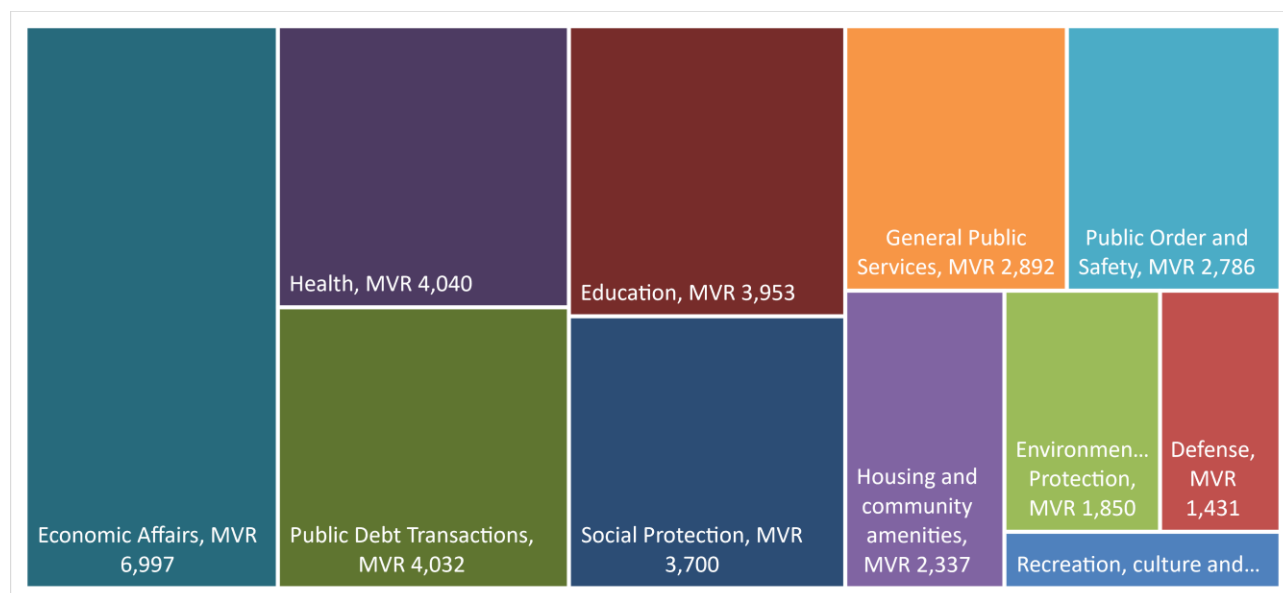


Maldives has committed an impressive and very substantial proportion of its budget to SDG related priorities, providing services such as free educational opportunity through university and healthcare for all. Now the SAP seeks to develop infrastructure to assure, for instance, that no one in the country is more than 30 minutes from medical care. Such efforts are taking place across many sectors. As a symptom of no long-term national development plan, investment in infrastructure is not yet matched with a comprehensive plan for human resources and institutional capacity development.

³⁶⁴ OECD Country Data, <https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDCAIdatagancebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no?&:showVizHome=no> accessed 1 December 2020.

Building capacities for implementation and enforcement of policies would require an expansion of the public sector, requiring painful trade-offs with infrastructure investment, to maintain fiscal restraint. Specifically, capacity building would entail an improvement in conditions of service for technical cadres. It will also require a step change in the availability and use of data, and in civic education around data-driven choices.

Figure 13: Functional classification of budget 2021 (in millions of MVR)³⁶⁵



Foreign direct Investment

Foreign direct investment (FDI), is a principal means of financing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and a prominent means of implementation of SDG 17. In Maldives, FDI is an important source of much needed, targeted infrastructure investment.

Currently, FDI inflows into Maldives are concentrated in large tourism and infrastructure projects. As the figure below illustrates, FDI inflows into the country have been on an upward trend since 2015 with a slight dip in 2018. Between 2018 and 2019, inward FDI grew 24 per cent to \$3.8 billion. Much of this growth was due to large scale investments in the construction sector. Many of the investment projects that occurred in the Maldives in 2019 were led by investors based in neighboring countries in the Asia and Pacific region, including India, China, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Thailand. With the COVID-19 pandemic impacting economies throughout the globe, MMA estimates that the FDI to decline by 46 per cent in 2020.

³⁶⁵ FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES

General Public Services: Executive and legislative, financial, and fiscal affairs, external affairs; General Services; Public Debt Transactions

Defence: Military, Civil Defence, Police, Fire Protection

Public Order & Safety: Law Courts, Prisons

Economic Affairs: Economic, Commercial & Labour, Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing, Fuel & Energy, Transport, Communication

Environmental Protection: Waste Management, Wastewater Management, Pollution abatement, Protection of Biodiversity & Landscape, R&D Environmental Protection, Environmental Protection N.E.C

Housing & Community Amenities: Housing Development, Community Development, Water Supply, Street Lighting, Housing & Community Amenities N.E.C

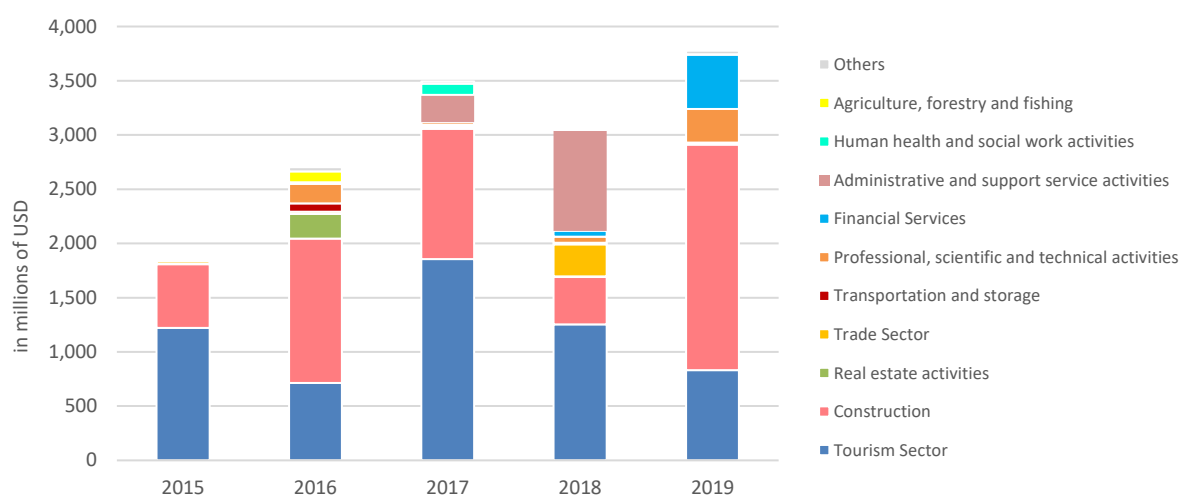
Health: Hospital Services, Public Health Services

Recreation, Culture & Religion: Recreational & Sporting Services, Cultural Services, Broadcasting & Publishing Services, Religious & Other Community Services

Education: Tertiary Education, Education N.E.C

Social Protection: Sickness & Disability, Old Age, Survivors, Family & Children, Social Protection N.E.C

Figure 14: Composition of FDI Flows, 2015-2019 (millions of USD)



Source: Ministry of Economic Development

Although FDI has been on an upward trend over time and is projected to rebound following the economic recoveries across the world, there is still significant room for it to grow and to make more of contribution to the sustainable development of the country. To this end, it is critical that investment facilitation efforts prioritise identifying, attracting, and appropriately evaluating projects in key sustainable development sectors beyond just large-scale one-time infrastructure projects. For instance, attracting FDI in key sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency products and services, education, health, water, and sanitation is essential. Such investment facilitation efforts, however, hinge on carefully yet swiftly developing and operationalising the necessary FDI policies and regulatory frameworks that maximize the sustainable development potential of FDI in the Maldives.

Beyond improving the FDI policy environment and investment facilitation efforts, dedicated efforts and significant resources must be channelled into improving the business environment. The Maldives continues to rank below par on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Ranking and slipped down from 139 in 2018 to 147 in 2019 and has remained at this level in 2020. While progress in recent years has been made in terms of the ease of starting a business, in other areas conditions have stagnated or worsened, including for registering property, accessing finance, protecting minority investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts and resolving insolvencies. Resolving such bottlenecks is critical to encouraging growth in both foreign and domestic investment from the private sector.

Efforts to improve the business climate will not only encourage foreign investors, but also support and enable domestic small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to flourish and contribute to economic growth and sustainable development of the country. To unleash the development potential of SMEs and enable them to make significant contributions to in-country sustainable development, SME policies and support in the Maldives need to address the following areas in particular:

1. Improving SME access to finance which the current administration has made massive gains by commencing the operations of the SME bank;
2. Improving entrepreneurship development, particularly women entrepreneurship development, through education and training programmes;
3. Strengthening and expanding networking and information dissemination opportunities to further support technology transfer and collaboration among firms as well as better business development services; and
4. Strengthening the linkages between foreign direct investors and SMEs.

It is critical that policies to address these issues be tailored to the specific needs of the SME sector, i.e. based on the detailed assessment of the sector and what could work in it, and also that they are developed in consultation with key stakeholders in the sector so as to ensure buy-in.

Potential opportunities for leveraging SDG financing

Mobilizing domestically controlled resources held offshore by the wealthiest Maldivians is key to advancing the Maldives’ future economic, social, and institutional transformation. Most of the revenue of the Maldives’ high-end tourist resorts never enters the local banking system, and a significant proportion is held offshore by a small cohort of owners. Until now, there has been no income tax in Maldives, and the tourism industry has contributed to national development through business taxes and fees on tourist stays.

In later 2020, the Government has implemented a new personal income tax, with the support of wealthy Maldivians (many of whom may benefit by being able to avoid tax in other, higher tax jurisdictions) with the following tax brackets and tax rates:

Annual income range	Tax Bracket (%)
0 – 720,000	0%
720,000 - 1,200,000	5.5%
1,200,001 - 1,800,000	8%
1,800,001 - 2,400,000	12%
2,400,001 and above	15%

Source: Ministry of Finance

The Government has yet to secure the resources and capacities (means of implementation) needed to implement the 2030 Agenda. The INFF will play an important role in bringing together the SDG policy and priorities with financing initiatives in a holistic and systematic manner across Government. The INFF brings together four important and new elements to the Maldives development financing agenda:

- It aims to bring climate action and gender responsive and equity-based approach to public investments in the social sectors;
- It aims to articulate the architecture and governance of financing. While many IFIs and bilateral donors (including USAID and EU) support the PFM reforms and macro-economic strategies, those reforms have been largely ad hoc and do not form part of a larger strategic approach; and
- It recognizes the role of the private sector in delivering national development and SDGs. It will strengthen existing platforms/forums to enable regular and effective dialogue with the private sector and civil society to strengthen coordination and trust between the government and domestic and international private sector representatives.

Blended finance for a sustainable recovery in Maldives

The Maldives is the most heavily impacted SIDS by COVID-19 with respect to reduction in growth, with the World Bank³⁶⁶ estimating the growth rate to shrink by 19.5 per cent and debt to GDP levels to reach 120 per cent by the end of 2020. The IMF “approved the disbursement of SDR 21.2 million (about US\$28.9 million) to be drawn under the Rapid Credit Facility (RCF) to help cover balance of payments and fiscal needs, stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.” The recovery is expected to be sluggish and debt levels are expected to reach

³⁶⁶ World Bank South Asia Briefs September 2020

128 per cent of GDP by 2022 leaving the Government in an extremely vulnerable position to channel capital towards recovery efforts while servicing its debt. The Maldives is at a high risk of debt distress which has the potential to constraint social spending and result in the retrogression in economic and social rights.

According to the IMF, “the fiscal space to respond to the crisis by increasing spending and the deficit is limited due to the high public debt.” According to the IMF, the “fiscal policy response should focus on carefully designed spending reductions, especially in terms of the past ambitious public investment plans, and a reallocation of resources towards healthcare spending and other measures that provide temporary support for vulnerable households and businesses most affected by the crisis” Such an approach can help to ensure that no one is left behind if it is informed by the human rights minimum core obligation.³⁶⁷ Given the position of Maldives as a SIDS with its vast “climate assets”, potential for nature conservancy and being a relatively newcomer to innovative financing landscape, the Government can gear its financing strategy towards novel financing strategies. Within this context, it is important to note that the Maldives has issued two sovereign bonds, amounting to US\$350 million.

Potential opportunities for leveraging SDG financing

The government has proposed a new personal income tax, with the support of wealthy Maldivians (many of whom may benefit by being able to avoid tax in other, higher tax jurisdictions). The [Income Tax Bill](#) submitted before parliament on 14 October 2019 would introduce a personal income tax on annual income as follows:

- Up to MVR 480,000 - 0%
- MVR 480,001 up to 720,000 - 8%
- MVR 720,001 up to 1,200,000 - 10%
- MVR 1,200,001 and over - 15%

It should be noted that the IMF considers 15 per cent “low”. It might be useful to explore taxation on wealth as well as income. Revenue generated from a progressive tax system on income and wealth can be used for social spending, contribute to the minimum core obligation in these times of crisis and progressive realisation during recovery, which in turn will positively impact attainment of the SDGs.

Another important proposed measure of the Income Tax Bill is the broader application of withholding tax for payments to non-residents.

The Government and development partners could also explore a campaign for national development in partnership with this cohort of the wealthy, within a multi-stakeholder partnership. Civic participation with a focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups, including young women and people with disabilities, in such a mentioned campaign through volunteer mechanisms under facilitation of the UN would ensure effective localization of SDGs and participatory approach. From a human rights perspective, a multi-stakeholder partnership would have greater potential to devise effective recommendations that benefit those most left behind.

Such a campaign should be promoted through a coordinated donor-national partnership mechanism for the SDGs as part of a national SDG Financing Strategy. Further measures should include putting in place regulations and incentives to ensure that financing flows towards investments that advance the SDGs and prove the “additionality” offered by responsible investment and innovative finance models.

³⁶⁷ Request for Disbursement under the Rapid Credit Facility. IMF, 2020.

Government, in partnership with foreign bilateral (mainly regional) partners and the UN, philanthropy, businesses, investors, communities, civil society and academia, should seek to create momentum through initiatives like the SDG Philanthropy Platform, a global initiative connecting foundations and philanthropists to deepen collaboration, leverage resources and sustain impact, or a pipeline of social impact bonds that bear potential for replication and can be turned into larger outcome-based facilities.

A national campaign for the SDGs could also include fundraising from the public - individuals, both Maldivians and tourists. There is no tradition of giving to secular causes in Maldives, but targeted fundraising efforts could create a much-needed flow of funds for NGOs and decentralized services.

At present there is only limited coordination among Maldives development partners. The new NDP, when approved, should provide the framework for such a renewed commitment to leveraging SDG financing.

Chapter 8: Gaps and challenges towards achieving the 2030 Agenda

The country context analysis pointed to several tensions between economic, social, and environmental sustainability goals in the country. The challenges and gaps identified below reflect the key cross-sectoral linkages between different SDG goals and targets through the lens of the five critical dimensions: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership.

The Maldives is in rapid transition and requires an inspiring vision of the nation's goals and identity. The SAP provides a vision, but there is not yet consensus around key issues. These include the role of Islam, and its national expression, and the nature of democracy and rule of law. Further, it has a short timeframe, concluding in 2023.

Figure 15: The Five 'Ps'



The decline in the birthrate offers a demographic dividend, but only if the economy can diversify, generate attractive private sector jobs, and be used to create an environment where women can engage in productive activities and gender equality is the norm. Youth issues of employment, drugs, gangs, and violent extremism must be addressed successfully.

The vision and strategy for the nation has been contested politically over the past decade; autocratic or democratic, centralizing or decentralizing, traditional or modern. An inclusive national dialogue is needed to build consensus on a common path all can accept.

Another key challenge for the Maldives is to balance large investments needed in infrastructure gaps (to boost tourism,

increase resilience to climate change and improve service delivery) and the rapid accumulation of public debt. Overall indebtedness is high and reserves low.

There are large disparities in welfare and other socio-economic outcomes across regions. Poverty rates vary widely across atolls, with almost 1 in 5 Maldivians in the southern atolls being poor. Public sector jobs account for about 40 per cent of total employment. Public-private wage differentials and other benefits associated with public employment dis-incentivize young jobseekers from taking private sector opportunities.

The government faces difficult choices. It must contain recurrent spending and improve the efficiency of social spending, while renewing efforts in economic and social inclusion of all regions across the country, fostering private sector job creation and reducing vulnerability by enhancing disaster risk preparedness. And it must do so while improving public sector management and budget credibility.

Cross-Cutting Issues

Geography

- ▶ The spatial distribution of inhabited islands creates structural difficulties for development. Issues of transport & access receive priority but are hugely expensive to address. Further, the dispersion of small populations creates a constant barrier to policy implementation (i.e., difficulties investigating environmental violations or social welfare cases).
- ▶ Due to its geographical position and with the peculiar characteristics of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Maldives is particularly concerned by trade and trade facilitation. According to the World Bank 2020 Doing Business Report, Maldives overall ranks 147 in "Ease of doing business", but only 157 in the

“Trading Across Borders” category.³⁶⁸ The most recent data from the UN Global Survey on Trade Facilitation and Paperless Trade Implementation reveals that Maldives is below the regional and global implementation averages.³⁶⁹ Significant opportunities exist to improve trade facilitation mechanisms.

- ▶ Paperless trade makes international trade more efficient and transparent while improving regulatory compliance, particularly if trade-related data and documents in electronic form are exchanged across borders. Joining the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific might therefore be the solution of choice to address Maldives’ trade facilitation needs, in particular in the context of a rapidly digitalizing global economy.³⁷⁰
- ▶ There is a huge cost to provide even routine services. As a result, many social and environmental services are absent or low quality, or even underutilized (one foreign nephrologist was reported to have seen two patients per year).

Management issues

Government capacities

- ▶ Many progressive laws and policies have been adopted, but the limited size of departments constrains full implementation. The resourcing of the departments charged with implementing laws and plans is a perennial issue in small island countries.
- ▶ There has been limited strategic planning (including urban and territorial planning) and implementation capacity. Goals have tended to be short-term and defined as activities or outputs, with plans made and implemented in silos. Coordination, within government and among partners, is being increased.
- ▶ Workforce planning is limited, and a capacity development plan has not yet been developed. Scholarships and subsidies are not linked to skill gaps. For instance, the hiring of health sector personnel is not based on skills needs. In the same manner, education is not geared to needs of the job market. To the extent admission of migrant labourers is regulated (many are irregular), it is not tied to specific needs.

Data Issues

- ▶ As highlighted by the VNR submitted in 2017, lack of technical expertise in relation to data collection (in particular disaggregated by specific groups – sex, age, disability, and qualitative data on quality of life, services, and advances on rights) and management remains an impediment for the successful implementation of the SDGs.
- ▶ Strong support should be given to the ongoing development of a ‘National Strategy for the Development of Statistics’ (NSDS) for the period 2019-2030, as well as to its implementation.
- ▶ There is a need for stronger action on strengthening mechanisms to collect, process, analyze and manage data and statistics, especially for the social and environmental dimensions of the SDGs, including measures to promote data disaggregation.
- ▶ These include the deployment of technologies where appropriate, such as smart city technologies.

³⁶⁸ Doing Business 2020. Available from: <https://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/m/maldives/MDV.pdf> (accessed January 2020)

³⁶⁹ UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation. Available from: <https://unfssurvey.org/> (accessed January 2020)

³⁷⁰ ESCAP (2017). Digital Trade facilitation in Asia and the Pacific. Studies in Trade, Investment and Innovation, No. 87. Available from <https://www.unescap.org/publications/digital-trade-facilitation-asia-and-pacific-studies-trade-investment-and-innovation-87>. See also ADB(2017) “Trade Facilitation and Better Connectivity for an Inclusive Asia and Pacific”, available from <https://www.adb.org/publications/trade-facilitation-connectivity-inclusive-asia-pacific>. Potential benefits from achieving cross-border paperless trade in Asia and the Pacific have been quantified in terms of trade costs reductions and trade gains. Region-wide full implementation of cross-border paperless trade would generate export gains of at least 16% for Maldives, leading to increased exports of amount USD 46 billion per year. A more recent study finds that, if Maldives fully implements WTO TFA together with cross-border paperless trade measures, it could achieve trade cost reductions of 25%, instead of only about 7% if it aims at basic compliance with the TFA.

- ▶ There is increased connectivity and digitalization, but research is not disseminated, and data is not shared across departments.
- ▶ Data is not yet used effectively for decision making. Data is collected as a system of administrative inputs, not designed for analysis for evidence-based policy. And data is not disseminated among policy makers, including the Cabinet or President’s Office.
- ▶ Monitoring and surveillance are weak. Decisions are made based on survey data rather than routine administrative data.
- ▶ There is a lack of disaggregated data by age, sex/gender, disability, income, geographic location, etc.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- ▶ There is a weak culture of monitoring and evaluation. Limited experience in evaluations for policy making and absence of dedicated staff make this an under-resourced area for achievement of policy objectives.

The 5 Ps: challenges and gaps

Prosperity

- ▶ Rapid urbanization is straining ability to meet infrastructure needs, contributing to waste and pollution, environmental degradation, and accumulation of risks, and increasing inequalities, all of which could threaten future prosperity.
- ▶ Increase in migrant population and stagnation of labour productivity of Maldivian population coupled with an ageing population can impact the future of labour
- ▶ The financial sustainability of populist measures is a major issue. These include free health insurance cover and free education through a first degree.
- ▶ Low civil service salaries create retention problems at technical and managerial levels, which constrain policy implementation.
- ▶ The centralization fueled by the unconstrained growth of the “greater Malé” area is a countervailing force to decentralization efforts.
- ▶ The prosperity achieved by the nation is built on a narrow economic base. It is heavily reliant on high end tourism, which can be subject to shocks such as recession or terrorism, climate change and natural disasters. And the high-end tourism of Maldives requires levels of skill in its workforce that people from neighboring islands have difficulty in providing.
- ▶ The major expansion of the international migrant workforce in recent years has occurred without planning, adequate governance or protective labour standards or understanding of its long-term consequences for the local labour force.
- ▶ Migration should be made safe, regular, and orderly and the developmental gains of international migration need to be identified and harnessed.
- ▶ The concentration of wealth (both among a small circle of persons, and spatially in Malé) has created growing inequalities and exacerbates social tensions.
- ▶ Young people are literate but lack skills for employability. The youth bulge – a potential demographic dividend – is characterized by significant youth unemployment & unreadiness for jobs.
- ▶ Women’s exclusion from the modern economy is especially troublesome - gender roles and stereotypes constrain employment, and attitudes toward gender equality are becoming more conservative.

People

- ▶ The rapid transformation of the Maldives over the past forty years has strained traditional systems of social cohesion. Changes in family structure and the urbanisation caused by migration to Malé have led in some cases to the collapse of intergenerational support, requiring the creation of public care facilities.
- ▶ After the turmoil of the last decade, and the disappointment of excessive expectations of democracy, people mistrust politicians and institutions, contributing to low access to justice and social polarization. The alienation of youth (seen in drugs use, gangs, extremism, etc.) has become a major concern. And there has been a backlash against modernity itself, leading to hardening attitudes toward gender equality, a more fundamentalist religiosity, and significant extremism.
- ▶ A mismatch of education with workforce needs limits opportunities for women & youth.
- ▶ The protection of children is vastly under-resourced, left to be dealt with through inefficient social protection cash grants that do not address the underlying protection vulnerabilities of their beneficiaries.
- ▶ Collaboration between stakeholders is weak and existing communication and referral mechanisms are not implemented properly. While the new Child Rights Protection Act envisages major changes, actual implementation is a significant concern due to lack of financial and human resources and capacities.
- ▶ Because of limited opportunities for education and employment, people migrate internally to larger islands, but find conditions difficult there.
- ▶ There is an increase in non-communicable disease – there are high levels of smoking and overweight and low physical activity, but there is still a “double burden” of i.e., undernutrition. Hence government might not be able to sustain the social protection measures when the population is ageing and with longer life expectancies and with morbidity.
- ▶ Persons with disabilities and the elderly without caregivers suffer serious exclusion. Policy measures look to address some issues, but implementation is very limited.
- ▶ LGBT people are criminalized and discriminated against, increasing risk of violence, human rights, violations, and HIV/STI transmission and increase drug use.
- ▶ International migrants are vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace and in society at large and many are marginalized, with specific concerns related to a significant population of undocumented migrants.
- ▶ Mental health problems are a growing concern, particularly for young people who feel alienated by the older generation’s traditional views, the pressures to achieve results in modern society, and lack of life skills to develop resilient and positive coping mechanisms for the challenges faced in this transition.
- ▶ While protective legal frameworks exist, the absence of implementation capacity and the strength of traditional cultural norms result in unchecked violence against women, sexual abuse of children, and social exclusion of single mothers.
- ▶ The very limited availability of rehabilitative services for drug abuse has resulted in the permanent criminalization of most users who come in contact with the state.
- ▶ The impacts of climate crisis and disasters affect everyone. However, the adverse impacts disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, especially women and girls. There are multiple and intersecting factors that further add to the vulnerability of women and girls and influence their adaptive capacity, such as: ethnic origin; disability; social status; sexual and gender orientation; marital status; being head of a household; migration, minority and citizenship status; and age.

Planet

- ▶ The experience and lessons of the 2004 tsunami have sensitized the entire country to disasters including slow onset impacts of climate change, and both adaptation and mitigation measures are supported. However, urban planning and measures for urban resilience require greater attention.
- ▶ The Maldives is highly dependent on imported fossil fuels, and that dependency is growing - renewables are an addition, supplying part of a net increase in demand. Though the national medium-term target is for 30% of energy to be from solar, it is not yet reducing fossil fuel use. Thus far, alternative energy pilots tend to be small scale. Air pollution is increasing.
- ▶ Marine biodiversity is under threat. There has been a decline in fish stocks due to overfishing. Coastal ecosystems have been damaged due to disregard for environmental protection in development, construction, and land reclamation activities, as well as the pumping of raw sewerage directly into coastal waters. Sea temperature rise and ocean acidification have led to serious coral bleaching, as in 2016.
- ▶ Malé and some other islands are seriously overcrowded and dredging and land reclamation (now banned) have damaged reefs. A lack of urban planning is contributing to environmental impacts.
- ▶ Waste is burned or buried. Sewage is pumped, untreated directly into the sea. There are small-scale alternative pilots. Measures have been taken to ban open burning and single-use plastic bottles in future, and there is strong interest in developing a circular economy, but there has been no source reduction yet – though public awareness about the impact of plastics on the ocean has increase, plastics use and pollution have not seen a proportionate decline.
- ▶ The fresh groundwater lenses of most islands have become unusable, due to contamination, fertilizer use, salination or extraction. Potable water comes from desalination or rainwater capture. As temperatures rise due to climate change, and coastal erosion as an amplifier of salt intrusion issues, shortages increasingly occur during the dry season.
- ▶ Uneven distribution of natural resources and services may see a rise in internal migration from places with limited resources. Concentrated population centers without appropriate urban planning create increased exposure for large populations to the impacts of natural and man-made disasters.

Peace

- ▶ There is a limited popular understanding of democracy and the role of the state – there has been no civic education for over a decade. Consequently, politicians and the public are trapped in a populist cycle of demands and promises, leading to unsustainable spending and a loss of institutional stability and trust.
- ▶ In some areas of government work, there is formal commitment to reform but limited follow through (progressive policies without implementation). At the same time, in areas that affect the interests of the powerful, like regulation of migrant labour terms and conditions, little action is taken. There is need for a human rights-based approach to such issues, based on multi-stake holder partnerships.
- ▶ While the current government has taken important steps against impunity and abuses, especially in the judiciary, there have been no prosecutions for torture, investigations into deaths in detention have been inadequate and many child abuse cases have lingered in courts for many years.
- ▶ Though based on specific allegations against each judge, the wholesale removal of supreme court justices can give the appearance of a political ‘purge’, risking a cycle of ‘revenge’ after future political shifts. There is a need for a national process of dialogue and reconciliation. Weak institutions of accountability must be strengthened.

- ▶ Politically, the country has oscillated between competing national visions of centralization and decentralization. This is symptomatic of a public polarization on a number of levels; chiefly, it is reflection of the tensions between modernizing and traditionalist perspectives. It also reflects divisions between Malé and the atolls, and local island residents and migrants to larger islands.
- ▶ Human rights have been a prominent priority of the current government, and initial results have been achieved in a number of areas, particularly the rule of law. Increased accountability is a priority for the government. Much also remains to be done. In part this is due to weak implementation capacities, insufficient budgetary allocations, and lack of popular support for crimes against women and girls - for instance, the unresponsiveness of the state to sexual abuse and GBV and the needs of LGBT persons.
- ▶ Island youth wishing to continue school beyond lower secondary must leave home, often to Malé. Without a system of hostels, young people face overcrowded quarters, and pressures to join gangs use drugs. Drug use is criminalized, with the intention of rehabilitation, but the shortage of facilities makes the system highly punitive. The criminal justice system does not provide 'second chances', and prisons and juvenile detention are noted for harsh conditions.
- ▶ State care facilities for people with special needs, the elderly and abused or neglected children are new, small and lack adequate human and financial resources to fulfil their obligations towards the people in their care. Mental health issues are particularly underserved.
- ▶ Corruption and state capture by a perceived oligarchy are serious problems which result in reduced government revenues for the promotion of human rights and development.
- ▶ Violent extremism has gained adherents in Maldives – it is claimed that in per capita terms, Maldives has been a leading source of Foreign Terrorist Fighters. The government has successfully used foreign partnerships to prevent domestic incidents and is actively managing the licensing of preachers. A facility is being established for the reintegration of widows and children from Syria.

Partnerships

- ▶ Development planning is only now being revived after a hiatus. The SAP and budget are not yet linked to SDGs, nor to a long-term plan. Four government coordination bodies have planning, oversight, and coordination roles (the Office of the President, Development Planning & Infrastructure, Foreign Affairs and Finance). Coordination is not fully systematized.
- ▶ Donors are largely based offshore, though more missions are opening in Malé. The government is now more actively engaged in donor coordination. The UN System could play an important role in catalyzing the coordination of development finance for Maldives on behalf of government, including with non-traditional donors and partners such as India and China. However, the UN system itself is faced with limited and uneven resources among its agencies, given Maldives new upper-middle income status, and a new partnership model is needed.
- ▶ Key UN agencies do not have an effective presence on the ground. For instance, there is a critical need for help in housing and spatial planning, but UN-Habitat is not playing a significant role in Maldives.
- ▶ The civil society sector is nascent in the Maldives and organised civic engagement generally weak. CSOs have a critical role to play, in the absence of government implementation capacities. They are desperately needed for service delivery to the vulnerable. Ad hoc government partnerships with CSOs exist. However, most CSOs lack capacity to make proposals or manage projects, and large numbers of them are inactive. The culture of private giving to secular CSOs is absent in the Maldives, and this requires support from

external partners. The UN Maldives launched a monthly UN-CSO Forum in May 2020. The forum convenes monthly on various SDG themes. These efforts will be reviewed and strengthened in 2021.

- ▶ Resources for development have been greatly constrained by Maldives accession to upper middle-income country status - as an upper-middle income country, grant funding is limited, except for environment. SIDS status is a basis for support. However, in future sources of funding will increasingly have to come from non-traditional sources. Private sector partnerships around specific SDG goals are one possibility, as are innovative collaborations with major partners India & China, and around non-traditional new economic niches now under discussion (e.g., financing Halal tourism, becoming an Islamic finance hub).

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Analysis of Risks

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
All SDGs	<u>Political Stability</u> : risks to stability of established government structures and strategies in the Maldives resulting from politically driven factors	Highly politicized, competing national visions create risk of abrupt reversal of national strategy (centralization/decentralization) upon change of government	Medium	High	Absence of national vision and long-term plan developed with participation of all political alignments Number of political appointees Transparency Indices Perception of corruption
		High number of political appointees in government risks serious capacity loss on change of government	High	Medium	Numbers of political appointees
		Lack of defined role and powers of the opposition leads to “winner take all” mentality and polarization in politics	Medium	Medium	Opposition participation in national processes (commissions, committees & etc.)
		Low accountability/transparency provides space for corruption and rent seeking	High	High	Transparency International ranking
16, 17, 10	<u>Internal Security</u> :	Extremist ideology leads to internal conflict and violence (i.e., attacks on tourists, moderate social voices)	High	High	Numbers of incidents, online threats
		Failure to successfully promote inclusive development, tolerance and respect for diversity leads to violent extremism	High	High	Support for inclusive development, tolerance and respect for diversity in Rights Side of Life surveys
16, 17, 10	<u>Democratic Space</u> : limited roles and capacities of civil society and the political opposition result in shrinking civic space and polarization around civil and political rights	Targeting, limiting the work of and closing human rights organisations	Medium	Medium	Number of active human rights organisations CIVICUS Monitor Freedom of the World Report World Press Freedom Index
		Lack of defined role and powers of the opposition leads to “winner take all” mentality and polarization in politics	Medium	Medium	Opposition participation in national processes (commissions, committees & etc.)
		Democratic space is occupied by non-moderate political actors	Low	High	Analysis of local media and social media including during elections

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
1, 4, 5, 10, 13	<u>Social inclusion and cohesion, gender equality and non-discrimination</u> : risks to social unity and equality resulting from direct and indirect discrimination, geographic inequalities, and demographic trends	Limited opportunities for Maldivians to access decent jobs lead to higher income inequalities, migration to larger islands, resentment of international migrant workers and loss of human capital	Medium	Medium	Share of employment of Maldivians in high-end resorts, share of self-employed, average wage in fisheries & agriculture compared to average national wage;
		Young people face increasing barriers in entering the labour market, due to limited skills not matching labour force needs, jobs located away from home islands	Medium	High	Occupational gender segregation, gender wage gap
		Unequal treatment, including public perceptions, of undocumented migrants leads to further marginalization and exploitation	Medium	Medium	Inclusion of undocumented migrants in studies and surveys
		Lack of access to quality population and other social data prevents accurate targeting of policy measures	High	High	Use of data analyses by parliament and presidency
		Inadequate implementation of policy recommendations and legislative provisions on gender equality	High	High	Rate of enforcement of gender sensitive policies
		Negative attitudes toward gender equality increasing	High	High	Perception surveys
		Urban and outer island inequalities in access and quality of public services persist	High	Medium	Key health/education indicators by urban/outer island
		Social norms, practices and attitudes act as barriers to women entering higher education, vocational training, and senior positions in political and economic structures as well as to pursue their own professional careers, influencing the reproductive health decisions and gender power dynamics in families	Medium	Medium	Qualitative studies on social attitudes on women and men's roles
		Inadequate disability-inclusive policies, coupled with social stigma and limited accessibility hold back inclusion of children with disabilities (CWD) into mainstream education, and inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWD) into the work world	Medium	Medium	CWD attending mainstream education Employment of PWD Qualitative studies on attitudes to inclusion of PWD

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
		Inequalities, discrimination and GBV remain invisible, due to lack of sex disaggregated data, or lack of use/ data sharing and culture of privacy around “family matters”	Medium	Medium	Open access guaranteed to a robust SDG data base.
16, 17	<u>Regional and Global Influences:</u> Risks to the integrity, stability, safety and prosperity of the Maldives and its people as a result of the actions of external actors, or the influence of external events or ideologies	Rivalry for influence among major powers, leading to conflicts or interventions in national affairs and regional geopolitics	Low	High	Analyses of debt and financial inflows; Reports on national and regional responses to terrorism, violent extremism; Perception surveys on tolerance; IOM indicators on migrants. Global Compact for Migration (Objective 17)
		External promotion of fundamentalist Islam leads to heightened social conflict	Medium	High	
		Absence of an open and evidence-based public discourse on migration and migrants leads to negative perceptions of migrants in society	Low	High	
16,18	<u>Rise in violent extremism:</u> Risks of a rise in intolerance fueled by unchecked hate speech, exploitation of perceptions of internal marginalization by violent extremist actors and action by State forces during counter-terrorism operations.	Individuals rally people on basis of perceived threats to faith and practice;	High	High	Analysis of content and organization of mass protests
		Overly broad definition of terrorism in current laws leads to misuse of Counter-terrorism capabilities as well as legal and penal provisions	High	High	Human rights data, judicial verdicts
		Rise in instances of hate speech deepening polarisation	High	High	Violence against expats/ foreign migrant workers
		Rise in censorship/ curbs against fundamental freedoms	Medium	High	Executive decrees, judicial verdicts and parliamentary resolutions
16, 17	<u>Justice and Rule of Law:</u> risks to the fair, effective and comprehensive implementation and application of law and accountability	Lack of access to legal aid for women, child victims, asylum seekers / refugees, and atoll population	Medium	Low	Progress in meeting treaty body and Rapporteur recommendations
		Lack of system guaranteeing human rights safeguards during criminal proceedings in practice: independent judicial control over detentions, effective investigation of torture allegations, legal aid, fair trial.			
		Inadequate budget allocations and expenditures linked to access to justice			
		Mistreatment, including physical abuse and torture, of persons while under arrest or incarcerated			

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
		Limited rehabilitation services for drug users results in their criminalisation	Medium	Medium	Recommendations to improve prison conditions, and allow access to independent observers to monitor closed facilities, Address issues of disappearances.
		Limited capacity for rehabilitation of violent extremist returnees	High	Medium	
		Lack of confidence in investigations of past human rights abuses	High	Medium	Publication of findings
		Weak capacity of the human rights machinery	High	Low	Number of complaints processed and leading to accountability
8, 9, 17	<u>Economic Growth & Stability</u> : risks to the economic, financial, and fiscal stability of the country, and inequality which could impact governance, social cohesion, or people's ability to satisfy their needs	Limited workforce planning, investment in quality education and job creation for youth lead to missing potential demographic dividend	High	High	National human resources capacity plan; Employer satisfaction with capacity of new hires; Number of private sector jobs created
		Vulnerability of current economic growth model to fluctuations in tourist demand due to reliance on high-end premium market; disruption in supply chains, global demand (tourism influx) and COVID-19 pandemic	Medium	High	Share of high-end tourism in GDP Unemployment rate, disaggregated by sex
		Slow progress in diversification and lack of conducive environment for private sector growth	High	Medium	Share and composition of private sector.
		Debt burden and/or investment climate change causes financial crisis and debt service impacting on the availability of revenue for economic, social and cultural rights	Medium	High	Size of debt burden and debt service; Share of FDI in GDP; Diversity of FDI origin by country; diversity of FDI destination by sector.
4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 17	<u>Infrastructure and access to social services</u> : risks to society and the population resulting from a lack of availability or limitations on access to physical infrastructure, and or quality social services	Urban and outer island inequalities in access and quality of public services persist Investment in physical infrastructure not matched by sufficient quantity and quality of human resource capacity to deliver public services, leading to slow progress in improving maternal and child mortality rates, and tackling NCDs Water stress risks increased by droughts.	High	Medium	Use of MICS data to collect maternal, child, infant, neonatal mortality rates; and access to pre-school by urban/rural, accessibility of schools Budget expenditures to social services, including health, social protection, education.

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
		Slow progress on promoting disability rights and disability-inclusive development, including improving accessibility for CWD and PWD	Medium	Medium	Incidence of key non- communicable diseases disaggregated by region, and urban and rural areas, Washington Group disability indicators;
		Lack of community-based social services means that vulnerable households and individuals fall through the cracks, and their needs cannot be addressed in a cross-sectoral way.	Medium	Medium	Number of social workers trained and employed in communities
8, 10, 16, 17	<u>Migration</u> : risks to the population and social cohesion resulting from improperly managed internal (domestic atoll to Malé) and/or international migration / asylum seekers / refugees	Large numbers of atoll residents continue to migrate to Malé, exacerbating social and environmental strains	High	Medium	Internal migration data; employment data on internal migrants; MICs data
Inadequate governance of migration continues to limit access to jobs in resorts for Maldivians		High	Medium	Employment data on resort industry	
Absence of an open and evidence-based public discourse on migration and migrants leads to negative perceptions of migrants in society Conditions of work and health of international migrants continue to be inadequate, undocumented migrants lack access to basic services and human rights		High	Medium	Data on migrant numbers; Registration data; Health data; Prosecutions for trafficking Global Compact for Migration	
3, 13, 17	<u>Public Health</u> : risks to the population, the economy and stability of the territory resulting from actual and emerging public health emergencies and impact of pandemic in disrupting supply chains, demand and leading to livelihood losses.	Lack of data on migrant health may lead to unpreparedness to cope with communicable disease outbreaks (potentially including TB)	High	Medium	Incidence of communicable diseases in migrant population.
Urbanisation may lead to increases in NCDs		Low	Medium	Incidence of cardio-vascular illnesses	
2, 17	<u>Food Security, Agriculture</u> : risks to people, agriculture and/or food production in the territory resulting from crop, food production. Reliance on food imports, impacts of global and regional shocks (such as pandemic) and climate change in regards to food security.	Poor management of water and land resources leading to increases in land and water salinization, and reduction in productivity and land available for food production	High	Low	Land salinity
Limited capacity for food safety leads to biological, chemical or physical foodborne illness		High	Medium	Food safety checks performed to international standard	

SDGs	Risk Areas	Risk factors	Likelihood	Impact	Early warning indicators
9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17	<p><u>Environment and Climate Change</u>: risks to the islands, freshwater lenses, eco-systems, and people resulting from issues associated with the environment, climate change and natural resources.</p> <p>Increasing risks of natural and man- made disasters, driven by climate change</p>	Islands affected by worsening environmental degradation due to untreated sewage, pollution, and waste	High	Medium	Reporting of island erosion Decrease in water quality and purity
		Lack of firm country commitment or nationally defined contributions under Paris Agreement; Limited capacity and financing for adaptation.	High	Medium	New climate change strategy and defined contributions adopted
		Open waste burning continues to negatively affect health of local communities;	Medium	Medium	Ad hoc studies of waste burning
		Contamination of human and natural environment by pollution and waste	High	High	Progress toward a circular economy
		Climate induced internal migration among islands leading t overcrowding in underserved settlements, access to housing, WASH, etc.	Medium	Medium	Sample surveys
		Damages and losses, e.g. disruption to access to services, livelihood disruptions, increased costs to provide emergency relief (drinking water, etc.) Malé and atolls not prepared to deal with floods or other disasters arising from extreme weather events. Projected sea level rise and coastal inundation and increase average precipitations from climate change projections.	Medium	High	Number of islands with comprehensive disaster management plans
		Exposure to flood, erosion, drought and hazards, and increasingly severe impacts of climate extremes; leading to increased vulnerabilities in terms of food security, water security, infrastructure disruption and damage, damage and losses on productive sectors, livelihood losses, etc.	High	High	Monitoring of Sendai Framework Targets and Indicators on human (mortality, people affected), economic (losses across sectors) and infrastructure impacts due to disasters, and strategies and actions (early warning systems, investments) reducing disaster risks.

Annex 2: Core UN Human Rights Treaties, ILO Conventions & Environmental Conventions & Regulations

RATIFICATION STATUS MALDIVES		
Treaty	Signature date	Ratification Accession(a), Succession(d) Date
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)		20 Apr 2004 (a)
Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture (CAT-OP)	14 Sep 2005	15 Feb 2006
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR)		19 Sep 2006 (a)
Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty (CCPR-OP2-DP)		
Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED)	06 Feb 2007	
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)		01 Jul 1993 (a)
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)		24 Apr 1984 (a)
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)		19 Sep 2006 (a)
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMV)		
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	21 Aug 1990	11 Feb 1991
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (CRC-OP-AC)	10 May 2002	29 Dec 2004
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography (CRC-OP-SC)	10 May 2002	10 May 2002
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	02 Oct 2007	05 Apr 2010

ACCEPTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES FOR MALDIVES			
Treaty Description	Treaty Name	Acceptance of individual complaints procedures	Date of acceptance/non acceptance
Individual complaints procedure under the Convention against Torture	CAT, Art.22	N/A	
Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	CCPR-OP1	YES	19 Sep 2006
Individual complaints procedure under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	CED, Art.31	-	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	CEDAW-OP	YES	13 Mar 2006

Individual complaints procedure under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	CERD, Art.14	N/A	
Optional protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	CESCR-OP	NO	
Individual complaints procedure under the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	CMW, Art.77	-	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child	CRC-OP-IC	-	
Optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	CRPD-OP	NO	

ACCEPTANCE OF THE INQUIRY PROCEDURE FOR MALDIVES			
Treaty Description	Treaty Name	Acceptance of inquiry procedure	Date of acceptance/non acceptance
Inquiry procedure under the Convention against Torture	CAT, Art.20	YES	20 Apr 2004
Inquiry procedure under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	CED, Art.33	-	
Inquiry procedure under the Optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	CEDAW-OP, Art. 8-9	YES	13 Mar 2006
Inquiry procedure under the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	CESCR-OP, Art.11	-	
Inquiry procedure under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child	CRC-OP-IC, Art.13	YES	27 Sep 2019
Inquiry procedure under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	CRPD-OP, Art.6-7	-	

ENVIRONMENTAL CONVENTIONS & NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORKS	Date of ratification / completion
Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)	09 – 11 – 1992
Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal	1992
CBD National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP)	2016 - 2025
Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity	2003
Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS)	1– 07 - 2019
UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)	09 – 11 - 1992
UNFCCC National Communications (1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd)	05 – 11 – 2001 (1 st), 2011 (2 nd)
UNFCCC Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMA)	n/a

ENVIRONMENTAL CONVENTIONS & NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORKS	Date of ratification / completion
UNFCCC National Adaptation Plans of Action (NAPA)	2007
Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for Paris Accord	2016
UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)	03 – 09 - 2002
UNCCD National Action Programmes (NAP)	03 – 09 - 2002
Stockholm Convention (SC) on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)	17 – 10 – 2006
SC National Implementation Plan (NIP)	2017
Minamata Convention (MC) on Mercury	Not ratified yet
UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	2015
Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) for the UN SDGs	2017
Others relevant conventions	
Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and CITES	11-09-2003
SC National Implementation Plan (NIP)	n/a
Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)	n/a
Maldives Energy Strategy	2010
GEF National Capacity Self-Assessment (NCSA)	January 2009
Strategic Action Programmes (SAPs) for shared international waterbodies	1995
NATIONAL LAWS/REGULATIONS/POLICIES	
Strategic Action Plan of the Government of Maldives	2019 – 2023
Addu City Protected Area Regulation	2018
Fuvahmulah City Protected Area Regulation	2018
Gender Equality Law	2016
Ozone Layer Protection Act	2015
Disaster Management Law	2015
National Waste Management Policy	2015
Maldives Energy Policy and Strategy	2015
Regulation to control import of bird species as pets	2015
Migratory Birds Regulation	2014
Dewatering regulation	2013
Regulation on Land Reclamation and Dredging	2013
Hanifaru Management Regulation	2012
Regulation on Environmental Impact Assessment	2012
Environment Liability Regulation	2011
Plant Protection Act	2011

ENVIRONMENTAL CONVENTIONS & NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORKS	Date of ratification / completion
The Law on the Maldives Fisheries, Plant Protection Act	2010
National Waste Management Strategy	2008
Uprooting of Trees Regulation	2007
Regulation on protection and conservation of the environment in the tourism industry	2006
The Land Law	2002
Tourism Act	1999
Uninhabited islands act	1998
Environmental Protection and Preservation Act	1993
Coral and Sand Mining Regulation	1993